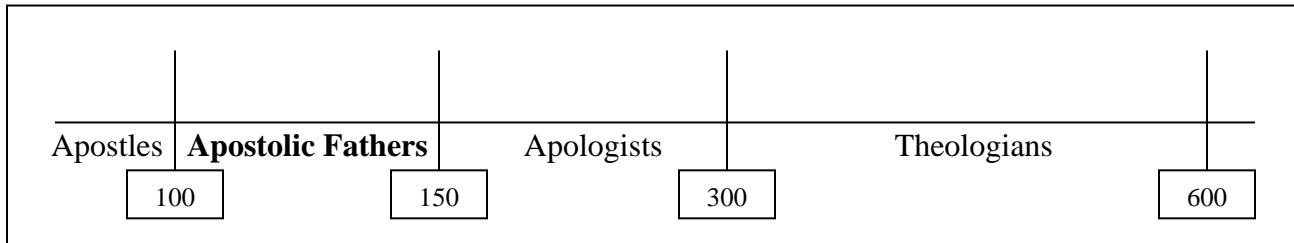


# Church History

- The history of the early church is generally defined as the period between A.D. 1 – 600. It can be roughly divided into four periods:



- I. The Apostolic Fathers were those leaders who attended the church in the period following the Apostolic Age.

The Apostolic Fathers include:

1. Clement of Rome
2. Ignatius of Antioch
3. Polycarp of Smyrna
4. Papias of Hierapolis

Other important literature included with the Apostolic Fathers:

1. Homily of II Clement
2. Epistle to Diognetus
3. The Didache
4. Shepherd of Hermas
5. Epistle of Barnabas

- II. Persecution was a significant issue for the church during this time. Faith in Christ was not prohibited explicitly by law, but ran afoul of Roman authorities because it did not affirm the divine genius that was believed to justify the rule of Roman emperors. However, the Romans were not the sole source of persecution, as local groups, of their own accord would often attack the church. The deaths of Stephen, James the son of Zebedee and James the Lord's brother all attest to this.

A. Official persecution took two forms during this age of the church.

1. At times, particularly in the region around Rome, there were fits of persecution from the imperial administration. The most notable example of this is during the reign of Nero, which resulted in a significant number of martyrs.
2. In the provinces, there tended to be less urgency to deal with Christians, though they were a persistent presence that governors had to deal with. During much of this age, Christians were under the rule of the “5 Good Emperors”, which presented a more enlightened governance.
  - a. A fantastic example of this is from the correspondence of Pliny the Younger during his time as governor of Bithynia. He wrote many letters to the emperor Trajan, seeking guidance on what to do with Christians.
  - b. Trajan’s response was that they must be punished if they refused to renounce Christ but that they were not to be sought out. He states:

*You have adopted the proper course, my dear Pliny, in examining into the cases of those who have been denounced to you as Christians, for no hard and fast rule can be laid down to meet a question of such wide extent. The Christians are not to be hunted out; if they are brought before you and the offence is proved, they are to be punished, but with this reservation – that if any one denies that he is a Christian and makes it clear that he is not, by offering prayers to our deities, then he is to be pardoned because of his recantation, however suspicious his past conduct may have been. But pamphlets published anonymously must not carry any weight whatever, no matter what the charge may be, for they are not only a precedent of the very worst type, but they are not in consonance with the spirit of our age.*

- c. This gentle relatively gentle approach to Christians was not to last. By the next century, it was official policy of the Roman Empire to seek out Christians, torture or kill them and to destroy the Scriptures.
- III. It was in the milieu of sporadic and localized persecution that the church was forced to confront its first great challenge: persevering and growing without the guidance of the Apostles. Problems could no longer be solved by seeking an authoritative answer from the Apostles. Therefore, the issue of authority is of primary concern.
- A. The issue of authority will ultimately be resolved by a principle now referred to as **apostolic succession**. This is the principle that a teacher's authority to interpret the Bible rested, in large measure, on their connection to the Apostles. Thus, a teacher who learned from someone who learned from one of the Apostles was considered to have authority to teach.
    - 1. There were many groups gaining traction that claimed to have had secret knowledge regarding Christ or His teachings that only they possessed. Apostolic succession was asserted to counter this. It was rightly believed that if Jesus had given secret knowledge to His apostles, then they, in turn, would have passed it on to those that they had taught. These teachings were contained within the Bible and if it taught contrary to what it said, then it was false. Those within the line of apostolic succession were the guardians of this knowledge.
    - 2. Originally, apostolic succession was intended to be inclusive, rather than exclusive. Contrary to the secret knowledge asserted by certain groups, it affirmed the combined teaching of all the apostles. The combined witness of all the apostles was at the core of the church. Thus, a follower of Paul would also affirm the teachings of John and Peter and a follower of Peter or James would affirm the teachings of Paul or John or one of their followers.
  - B. This was an important and effective safeguard against false teaching for many years of the early church. However, it will eventually become calcified and prove to be an obstacle as the church grows and expands and its relationship with the Roman Empire changes.
  - C. The Apostolic Fathers, thus, were the fathers of the church in the years following the age of the Apostles. They safeguarded the church as it sought to deal with the new situation.
- IV. Much of what is known about the Apostolic Fathers is derived from the writings they have left for us. Though there is a paucity of literature from this time period, what has survived offers a glimpse into the church as it grappled with its new reality. Some important observations about the church in this time can be gleaned from these writings.
- A. Most literature from the Apostolic Fathers was epistolary in nature, indicating their role as shepherds of the church. In line with this, their writings were primarily ethical, not theological.

1. In spite of the ambiguity that is common of their writings, glimpses into their theological understanding can be found. This is important because it is an opportunity to observe the essential unity of the teaching of the Apostles, as their writings are being passed on to new generations.
    - a. Though not confessed explicitly, the Trinitarian formula is used by the Apostolic Fathers.
    - b. The Apostolic Fathers strongly affirm the divinity of Christ.
    - c. They do connect the blood of Christ to salvation.
    - d. Sin is perceived as universal in all men.
    - e. The eschatology of the Apostolic Fathers unanimously proclaim four primary events: the second coming, the resurrection of the dead, the judgment and the end of the present world order.
  - B. The Apostolic Fathers were much more concrete in their understanding of the sacraments.
    1. Baptism was universally held to be the rite of admission into the church.
    2. The Apostolic Fathers saw the Lord's Supper as both a physical reality and a thanksgiving. It is important to note that they generally saw it focusing on a past event, rather than an ongoing reality.
- V. The three great leaders among the Apostolic Fathers are Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna. Each of them left letters to early Christians that give us insight into the state of the church, what issues were concerning to them and what challenges they confronted. These letters also give a small but important witness as to the types of leaders who led the early church. Each of these leaders is worth considering on their own.
- A. **Clement of Rome** – Known primarily from a single letter, Clement was a leader in the early church in Rome. He was part of this church around AD 90-100. It is noteworthy that this is written nearly at the same time that John was writing Revelation while exiled on Patmos.
    1. The specific identity of Clement is somewhat shrouded in mystery. Some traditions maintain that he was the third leader of the Roman church, following the successor of Peter. He has also been linked to a freedman of consul Titus Flavius Clemens, who is known to have been executed for atheism. It is also possible that he is the Clemens addressed by Paul in Philippians 4:3. In the end, the full identity of Clement is uncertain.
    2. The letter of Clement (Referred to as 1 Clement) is addressed to the church in Corinth, which was still fraught with divisions, decades after the apostle Paul had addressed similar problems in that church in the epistles 1 & 2 Corinthians. It is notable that the 1 Clement consistently uses the plural 1<sup>st</sup> person when addressing the Corinthians, indicating that Clement was part of a plurality of elders that were addressing the Corinthians in unison.
    3. 1 Clement displays knowledge and use of the Old Testament (Septuagint) as well as some of the books of the New Testament, especially the works of Paul and Hebrews. Of Paul's letters in particular, the letters to the Corinthians and Romans are used. The influence of Romans can be seen in passages like 1Clem 32:4

*And so we, having been called through His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified through ourselves or through our own wisdom or understanding or piety or works which we wrought in holiness of heart, but through faith, whereby the Almighty God justified all men that have been from the beginning; to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

The Christology of Hebrews, particularly the view of Christ as the high priest of Melchizedek is evident in passages like 1Clem 36:1-2

*This is the way, dearly beloved, wherein we found our salvation, even Jesus Christ the High priest of our offerings, the Guardian and Helper of our weakness. Through Him let us look steadfastly unto the heights of the heavens; through Him we behold as in a mirror His faultless and most excellent visage; through Him the eyes of our hearts were opened; through Him our foolish and darkened mind springeth up unto the light; through Him the Master willed that we should taste of the immortal knowledge Who being the brightness of His majesty is so much greater than angels, as He hath inherited a more excellent name.*

B. **Ignatius of Antioch** – A leader of the church in Antioch, an early center of the church, Ignatius was a brilliant example to the early church. Though his literary career was brief, consisting of 7 letters written on his way to being martyred, he has had a tremendous and long-lasting impact on the church. This is in part due to how early his writings are but also because of the distinct nature of some of his ideas.

1. Though Antioch was a church that was built on the work of Paul and Barnabas, church tradition holds that Ignatius was made leader of the church in that city with the support of Peter. This indicates that he had, at the very least, a familiarity with Paul, Peter and Barnabas. Furthermore, tradition holds that he was a disciple of John. That is broad apostolic support!
2. Ignatius yearned for martyrdom, which means he resolutely refused to yield to Roman authorities and renounce his faith. He likely appealed to the emperor and was thus sent to Rome, where he was executed. This was likely around the year AD 117.
3. A significant concern of Ignatius was false teaching within the church. He states in Epistle to Ephesians 6:2

*Now Onesimus of his own accord highly praiseth your orderly conduct in God, for that ye all live according to truth, and that no heresy hath a home among you: nay, ye do not so much as listen to any one, if he speak of aught else save concerning Jesus Christ in truth.*

He repeats these concerns in Epistle to Trallians 6:1-2

*I exhort you therefore -- yet not I, but the love of Jesus Christ -- take ye only Christian food, and abstain from strange herbage, which is heresy: for these men do even mingle poison with Jesus Christ, imposing upon others by a show of honesty, like persons administering a deadly drug with honied wine, so that one who knoweth it not, fearing nothing, drinketh in death with a baneful delight.*

4. Ignatius is concerned with the conduct and affairs of the church. As he marches to martyrdom, he is leaving behind his instructions for how they are to manage themselves appropriately. One significant concern of his is unity within the churches and out of this he argues that a church should have only one bishop. This argument will be unfortunately mined by factions within the church in the future.
5. So overwhelming was Ignatius' desire for martyrdom that in his Epistle to Romans he urges them not to seek his rescue or interfere with the Roman system that will ultimately lead to his execution.

C. **Polycarp of Smyrna** – Perhaps the most significant of the Apostolic Fathers, Polycarp was a critical link between the age of the apostles and the subsequent period dominated by the teachers known as the Apologists. He was a disciple of John, as well as mentored by Ignatius. His student Irenaeus, a giant among the Apologists, appeals to Polycarp as among the most significant leaders of the church during this time period. This sentiment is echoed by Eusebius, who wrote the first history of the church a couple hundred years later. Like Ignatius, Polycarp was ultimately martyred in his old age.

1. Only one work written by Polycarp survives to the present. This work, Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians, is a wonderful document that is filled with references to Scripture.

There are over 100 quotations or allusions to the New Testament, drawn from 17 books. He quotes from:

Matthew	Galatians	II Timothy
Mark	Ephesians	Hebrews
Luke	Philippians	I Peter
Acts	I Thessalonians	I John
I Corinthians	II Thessalonians	III John
II Corinthians	I Timothy	

2. Polycarp's grounding in Scripture resonates to this day. We recognize ourselves much of what concerned him:

Regarding Christ as King in Polycarp to the Philippians 2.1

*Wherefore gird up your loins and serve God in fear and truth, forsaking the vain and empty talking and the error of the many, for that ye have believed on Him that raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead and gave unto him glory and a throne on His right hand; unto whom all things were made subject that are in heaven and that are on the earth; to whom every creature that hath breath doeth service; who cometh as judge of quick and dead; whose blood God will require of them that are disobedient unto Him*

Regarding our need to submit to God and His Word in 6:3

*Let us therefore so serve Him with fear and all reverence, as He himself gave commandment and the Apostles who preached the Gospel to us and the prophets who proclaimed beforehand the coming of our Lord.*

Regarding our hope in Christ in 8:1-2

*Let us therefore without ceasing hold fast by our hope and by the earnest of our righteousness, which is Jesus Christ who took up our sins in His own body upon the tree, who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth, but for our sakes He endured all things, that we might live in Him. Let us therefore become imitators of His endurance; and if we should suffer for His name's sake, let us glorify Him. For He gave this example to us in His own person, and we believed this.*

Regarding the need to stand firm in the faith in 10.1

*Stand fast therefore in these things and follow the example of the Lord, being firm in the faith and immovable, in love of the brotherhood kindly affectioned one to another, partners with the truth, forestalling one another in the gentleness of the Lord, despising no man.*