

The Apostolic Fathers and Early Christianity

A Biblical and Historical Study of the Post-Apostolic Church from an Evangelical Protestant Perspective

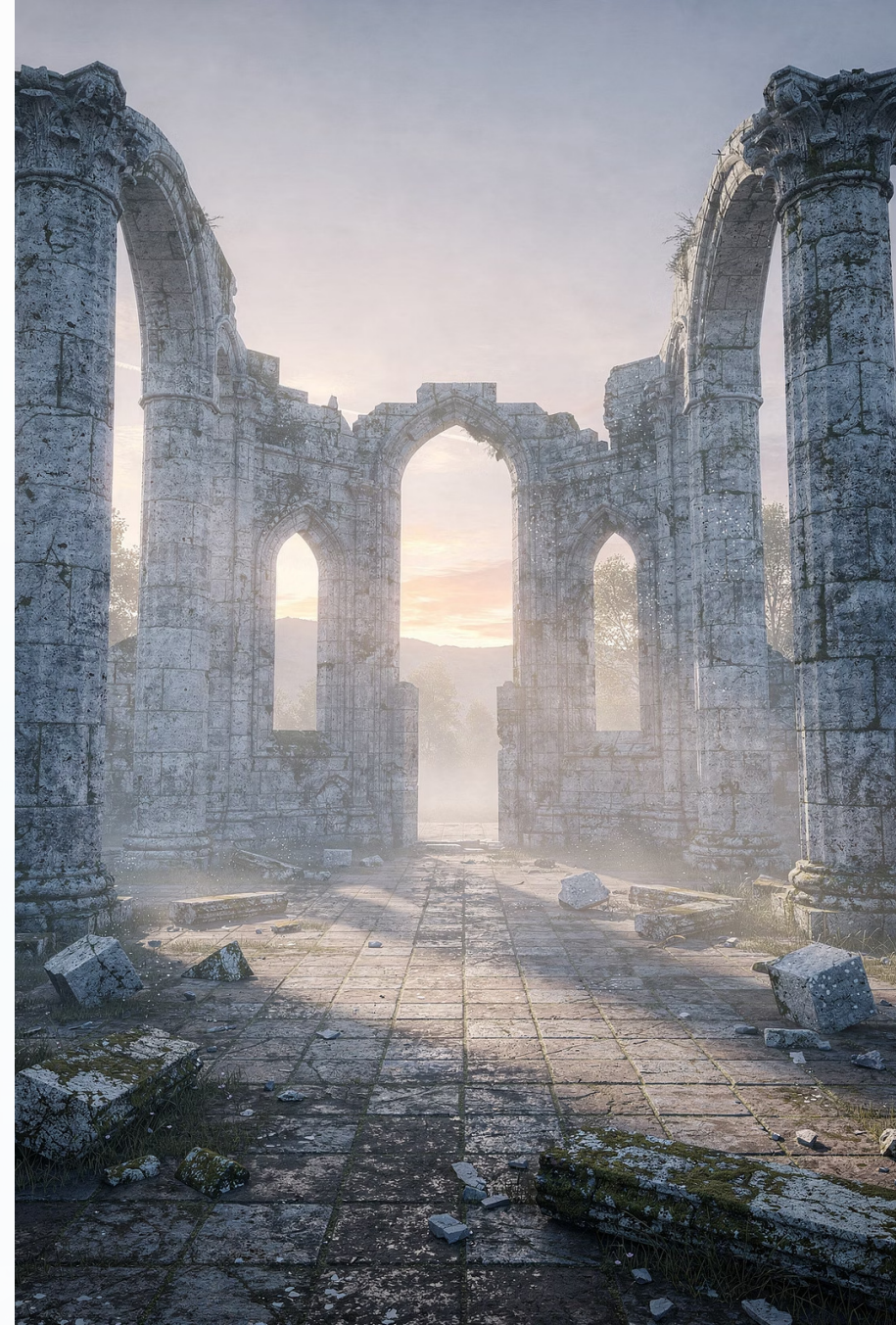


INTRODUCTION

Understanding Our Spiritual Heritage

The Apostolic Fathers represent the earliest generation of Christian leaders who followed immediately after the original apostles. Their writings, composed between approximately AD 90-160, provide crucial insight into how the early church understood, practiced, and defended the apostolic faith during a formative period of Christianity.

As Evangelical Protestants committed to Sola Scriptura, we study these writings not as equal to Scripture, but as historical documents that illuminate the context, challenges, and theological development of the post-apostolic church. This study helps us understand how early believers interpreted and applied biblical teaching in their cultural context.



Why Study the Apostolic Fathers?



Historical Context

They bridge the gap between the New Testament era and later church history, showing us how second-generation Christians understood apostolic teaching.



Doctrinal Defense

Their writings addressed early heresies and helped establish boundaries for orthodox Christian belief based on apostolic testimony.



Practical Ministry

They provide examples of early church organization, worship practices, and discipleship methods that emerged from biblical principles.



Theological Development

We can trace how key doctrines were articulated and defended in response to challenges facing the early church community.

KEY DEFINITION

Who Were the Apostolic Fathers?

The term "Apostolic Fathers" refers to a specific group of early Christian writers who either knew the apostles personally or were close to those who did. They wrote during the late first and early second centuries, maintaining direct connection to apostolic teaching.

Key Characteristics:

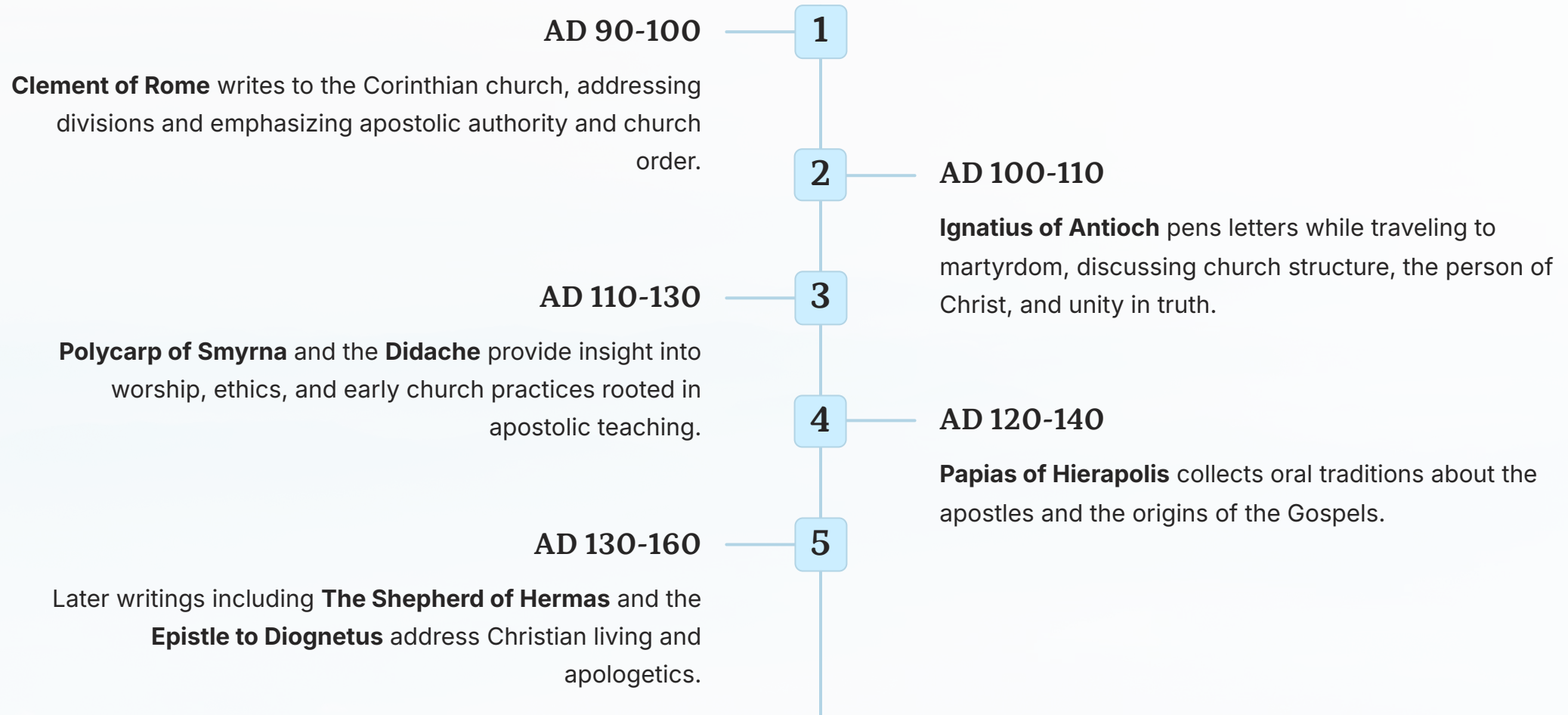
- Temporal proximity to the apostles (first and second generations after Christ)
- Geographic distribution across the Roman Empire
- Focus on practical theology and church life
- Emphasis on apostolic tradition rooted in Scripture



Important Distinction

These writings are **not Scripture**. While valuable historically and theologically, they lack divine inspiration and biblical authority. We study them as witnesses to early Christian faith, always testing their teachings against Scripture alone.

Timeline of the Apostolic Fathers



Clement of Rome (c. AD 35-99)



First Epistle to the Corinthians

Clement, an elder in the Roman church, wrote around AD 95-96 to address divisions in the Corinthian congregation. His letter emphasizes submission to church leadership, unity in Christ, and orderly worship based on apostolic precedent.

Key Theological Themes:

- Apostolic succession in church leadership
- Humility and submission as Christian virtues
- God's sovereignty over church order
- The importance of peace and unity

Clement's Biblical Foundation

Clement's letter demonstrates extensive knowledge of Scripture, quoting or alluding to both Old and New Testament texts. His approach reflects an early Christian understanding that biblical authority governs church life and practice.

Old Testament Usage

Frequent citations from the Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, and historical narratives to establish moral and organizational principles for the church.

New Testament References

Clear familiarity with Paul's epistles, particularly 1 Corinthians, Romans, and Hebrews, showing continuity with apostolic teaching.

Gospel Teachings

Echoes of Jesus's teachings on humility, servanthood, and love as the foundation for Christian community and leadership.



THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 35-108)

Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote seven letters while being transported to Rome for martyrdom around AD 107-110. His writings passionately defend orthodox Christology against early heresies and emphasize the importance of church unity under godly leadership.

Unlike Clement's focus on church order, Ignatius urgently addresses theological threats to the faith. He combats Docetism (the denial of Christ's true humanity) and Judaizing influences while encouraging believers to remain faithful unto death.

Ignatius's Key Theological Contributions

Christology

Full Deity and Humanity

Ignatius strongly affirms that Jesus Christ is both truly God and truly man, born of Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, and physically resurrected. This foundational doctrine counters heretical denials of the incarnation.

Church Unity

Gathered Around Truth

He emphasizes unity in the church centered on sound doctrine and faithful leadership. Division threatens both doctrinal purity and practical witness to the watching world.

Martyrdom

Witness Through Suffering

Ignatius views his impending death as an opportunity to imitate Christ and testify to the gospel's truth. His courage inspired generations of believers facing persecution.

Ignatius on the Person of Christ

"There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; God existing in flesh; true life in death; both of Mary and of God; first possible and then impossible—even Jesus Christ our Lord." (*Epistle to the Ephesians, 7*)

This remarkable statement demonstrates the early church's sophisticated understanding of Christ's dual nature. Ignatius articulates the mystery of the incarnation: Jesus is fully divine (not made, from God, impossible to suffer in His deity) and fully human (made, of Mary, capable of suffering and death). This theological precision, rooted in biblical teaching, became foundational for later credal formulations.

Polycarp of Smyrna (c. AD 69-155)



Polycarp represents a direct link to the apostolic age, having been a disciple of the Apostle John. His epistle to the Philippians and the account of his martyrdom provide profound insight into faithful Christian living and witness.

Historical Significance:

- Personal connection to Apostle John
- Defender of orthodox faith against Marcion and other heretics
- Martyred at age 86 for refusing to deny Christ
- Model of pastoral faithfulness across decades of ministry

Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians

Written around AD 110-140, Polycarp's letter addresses practical Christian living, church discipline, and doctrinal faithfulness. His teaching reflects deep biblical knowledge and apostolic wisdom passed directly from John.

01

Faith and Righteousness

Emphasizes justification by faith while stressing the inseparable connection between genuine faith and righteous living (Philippians 1:3, 3:2-3).

03

Church Leadership

Instructs elders and deacons in godly character, emphasizing compassion, integrity, and sound doctrine (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1).

02

False Teachers

Warns against those who deny Christ's physical coming in the flesh, identifying such teaching as antichrist (1 John 4:2-3; 2 John 7).

04

Perseverance

Encourages steadfast faith amid persecution, pointing to Christ's example and the promise of eternal reward (2 Timothy 2:12).

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

The account of Polycarp's death around AD 155 provides one of the earliest and most moving martyrdom narratives. When commanded to curse Christ and swear by Caesar, Polycarp responded with words that echo through history:

"Eighty-six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and Savior?"

His faithful witness unto death demonstrates the cost and conviction of early Christian discipleship. Polycarp's martyrdom encouraged countless believers to remain faithful under persecution, showing that true faith endures to the end.



The Didache (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles)

The Didache, discovered in 1873, is an early Christian manual of church practice and ethics, likely composed between AD 90-120. It provides invaluable insight into how the earliest post-apostolic communities organized worship, administered baptism and communion, and taught new converts.

1

The Two Ways

Opens with ethical teaching contrasting the way of life (obedience to Christ's commands) and the way of death (sin and rebellion)—a common early Christian catechetical approach.

2

Christian Practices

Provides instructions on baptism (preferably in running water, in the name of the Trinity), fasting, prayer (including the Lord's Prayer), and the Eucharist.

3

Church Order

Addresses the role of traveling apostles, prophets, and teachers, along with the selection of local bishops and deacons for congregational leadership.

4

Eschatology

Concludes with teaching on watchfulness and preparation for Christ's return, echoing Jesus's parables about readiness.

The Didache on Baptism and Communion

Baptismal Practice

The Didache instructs baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19), preferably in living (running) water. If unavailable, other water may be used. This shows flexibility in practice while maintaining theological consistency with the Great Commission.

Baptism follows instruction in "the Two Ways," suggesting a catechetical process before baptism—an early pattern of discipleship and preparation for church membership.

Communion Guidelines

The text provides early prayers for the Eucharist, emphasizing thanksgiving for God's provision and unity in Christ. Only the baptized may participate, reflecting the understanding that communion is a covenant meal for believers.

Instructions emphasize reconciliation before participation (Matthew 5:23-24), showing concern for worthy partaking consistent with Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32.

THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

The Epistle of Barnabas (c. AD 70-135)

Attributed to Barnabas (though authorship is debated), this epistle presents an allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament, arguing that the Mosaic Law pointed forward to Christ and has been fulfilled in Him. The author emphasizes that Christians are the true inheritors of God's covenant promises through faith in Jesus.

While the letter demonstrates sophisticated theological thinking about the relationship between the Testaments, its heavy use of allegory and sometimes strained interpretations remind us why Scripture alone—not early Christian writings—must be our final authority for doctrine and practice.



The Shepherd of Hermas (c. AD 90-150)

This lengthy work, composed in Rome, consists of visions, commandments, and parables received by a Christian named Hermas. It addresses moral living, repentance, church discipline, and preparation for persecution. While popular in the early church, it was ultimately recognized as non-canonical.

1

Visions

Apocalyptic revelations about the church, depicted as a tower being built with various stones representing different types of believers.

2

Commandments

Twelve moral and spiritual instructions covering faith, simplicity, truthfulness, purity, patience, and fear of the Lord.

3

Parables

Ten extended allegories teaching about repentance, faithfulness, spiritual warfare, and the need for practical Christian living.

Evaluating the Shepherd of Hermas

Strengths and Value

- Emphasizes genuine repentance and moral transformation
- Addresses practical Christian living in a pagan context
- Shows early church concern for church discipline and purity
- Provides historical insight into second-century Roman Christianity

Theological Concerns

- Suggests possibility of post-baptismal forgiveness through penance, raising questions about the sufficiency of Christ's atonement
- Complex angelology and visionary framework not clearly grounded in Scripture
- Lacks apostolic authority and direct connection to biblical revelation

This illustrates why the early church ultimately distinguished between Scripture and helpful but non-inspired writings. The Shepherd was valued but not placed on the level of apostolic writings.

THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

Papias of Hierapolis (c. AD 60-130)

Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, is known primarily through fragments preserved by later church historians, particularly Eusebius. He represents the transitional generation that collected oral traditions about Jesus and the apostles.

Papias's work, "Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord," is significant for its testimony to the origins of the Gospels. He claimed to have received information from those who knew the apostles personally, providing early external evidence for Gospel authorship and reliability.



Papias on the Gospels

Gospel of Mark

Papias records that Mark, as Peter's interpreter, "wrote down accurately everything he remembered" of what Christ said and did, though not in chronological order. This early testimony supports Markan authorship and apostolic eyewitness foundation.

Gospel of Matthew

He states that "Matthew compiled the sayings in the Hebrew language, and each one interpreted them as he could." This reference, though debated by scholars, provides early testimony to Matthew's Gospel composition.

Living Voice

Papias expressed preference for oral tradition from those who knew the apostles over written texts. This preference, while understandable in his context, highlights the subsequent need for canonical Scripture as the apostolic generation passed away.

THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

The Epistle to Diognetus (c. AD 130-200)

This anonymous letter, addressed to an inquirer named Diognetus, presents an eloquent defense of Christianity and explanation of Christian life in a pagan world. It stands as one of the earliest and most beautiful examples of Christian apologetics.

"Christians are not distinguished from other people by country, language, or customs... They live in their own countries, but as aliens. They participate in everything as citizens and endure everything as foreigners... They are in the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh."

The epistle articulates the paradox of Christian existence: fully present in the world yet fundamentally distinct from it, citizens of earthly kingdoms yet belonging to the kingdom of heaven.

Major Themes in the Epistle to Diognetus



Christians in the World

Believers are the "soul of the world"—present everywhere, essential to society's flourishing, yet often misunderstood and persecuted. They contribute to the common good while maintaining distinctive values.



The Gospel Message

Salvation comes not through human effort or philosophy but through God's gracious revelation in Jesus Christ. The incarnation demonstrates God's love and provides the only path to reconciliation.



Christian Love

Christians love those who hate them, pray for enemies, and show extraordinary compassion—demonstrating the transforming power of the gospel through concrete actions of mercy and justice.

CHAPTER BREAK

Theological Themes in the Apostolic Fathers



Christology: The Person and Work of Christ

The Apostolic Fathers unanimously affirm core christological doctrines rooted in apostolic teaching. Against emerging heresies that denied either Christ's deity or humanity, they consistently proclaim the incarnation: Jesus is fully God and fully man.

True Deity Christ is God, possessing divine attributes and worthy of worship. Ignatius calls Him "our God" and "God manifest in the flesh."	True Humanity Jesus was born of Mary, experienced genuine human life, truly suffered, died, and physically rose—refuting Docetic denials of real incarnation.	Savior and Lord Through His death and resurrection, Christ accomplished redemption, defeated sin and death, and reigns as sovereign Lord over all creation.
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Biblical Authority and Apostolic Teaching

The Apostolic Fathers demonstrate profound reverence for Scripture—both the Old Testament and the emerging New Testament writings. They cite biblical texts as authoritative, base their teaching on apostolic doctrine, and appeal to Scripture to settle disputes and combat error.

This early commitment to biblical authority foreshadows the Protestant principle of Sola Scriptura. While the Apostolic Fathers valued church tradition and apostolic succession, their ultimate appeal was to the written Word of God as the foundation for faith and practice.

Patterns of Scripture Use

01

Old Testament Foundation

Extensive quotation and allusion to the Hebrew Scriptures, interpreted through the lens of Christ's fulfillment of prophecy and typology.

03

Apostolic Letters

Frequent citation of Paul's epistles and other apostolic writings, treated with authority equal to Old Testament Scripture.

02

Gospel Traditions

Clear knowledge of Jesus's teachings, parables, and life events, whether from written Gospels or reliable oral tradition rooted in eyewitness testimony.

04

Doctrinal Standard

Scripture functions as the measuring rod for truth, the basis for correction, and the source of teaching—establishing the pattern of biblical authority.

The Church: Nature and Organization

Ecclesiology in the Apostolic Fathers

The early post-apostolic church was developing organizational structures to preserve apostolic teaching, maintain doctrinal purity, and facilitate effective ministry. The Apostolic Fathers reflect this developmental stage.

Key emphases include:

- Unity centered on truth and sound doctrine
- Leadership emerging from biblical qualifications
- Discipline to maintain holiness and purity
- Worship practices rooted in Scripture and apostolic precedent



From an Evangelical perspective, we observe both continuity with biblical patterns and early developments that would later evolve. We must carefully distinguish between apostolic teaching about the church and later institutional developments.

Leadership Structures in the Early Church



Apostolic Era

The New Testament presents apostles establishing churches with elders/overseers (bishops) and deacons serving local congregations (Acts 14:23; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:5).



Transitional Period

The Didache and Clement reflect plural leadership by elders, maintaining New Testament patterns. Traveling prophets and teachers supplement local leadership.



Emerging Monarchical Episcopacy

Ignatius strongly advocates for single-bishop leadership in each city, with elders and deacons serving under the bishop's authority—a development beyond the New Testament pattern.

Protestants recognize the functional value of varied church structures while maintaining that Scripture, not tradition, establishes normative patterns for church governance.

Salvation: Grace, Faith, and Works

The Apostolic Fathers affirm salvation by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, consistent with apostolic teaching. However, their emphasis on moral living and good works sometimes creates tension requiring careful interpretation.



Salvation by Grace

The writers consistently acknowledge that salvation originates in God's initiative, not human merit. Polycarp emphasizes faith in Christ as the means of justification, echoing Paul's teaching.



Faith and Obedience

They stress that genuine faith produces obedience and good works. This reflects James's teaching that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17)—works demonstrate faith's authenticity.



Eternal Judgment

The reality of final judgment based on one's response to Christ motivates holy living and faithful witness. Salvation is by grace, but believers will give account for their lives.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper

The Apostolic Fathers provide early testimony to baptismal and communion practices in the post-apostolic church. These practices were understood as ordained by Christ, rooted in His commands and apostolic example.

Baptism

- Administered in the name of the Trinity (Matthew 28:19)
- Followed instruction in Christian faith and ethics
- Symbolized death to sin and new life in Christ
- Marked entrance into the Christian community

The Lord's Supper

- Celebrated regularly as commanded by Christ
- Remembrance of Christ's sacrifice and anticipation of His return
- Emphasized unity of believers in Christ
- Required self-examination and reconciliation



Persecution and Martyrdom

The shadow of persecution looms large over the Apostolic Fathers. Writing during periods of sporadic persecution under Roman emperors, they encouraged believers to remain faithful even unto death, following Christ's example and trusting in resurrection hope.

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Ignatius's Witness

"Allow me to be eaten by the beasts, through whom I can attain to God. I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread of Christ."

“

Polycarp's Courage

"He that grants me to endure the fire will grant me also to remain at the stake unmoved, even without the security you will give by the nails."

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Such testimonies inspired generations of Christians to value faithfulness to Christ above physical life, trusting that "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).



CHAPTER BREAK

Challenges and Heresies

Early Heresies Confronted by the Apostolic Fathers

The post-apostolic church faced significant theological challenges from various heretical movements. The Apostolic Fathers defended orthodox Christian faith by clearly articulating biblical teaching on Christ's person, the nature of salvation, and the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.

Docetism

Denied Christ's true humanity, claiming He only "seemed" to have a physical body. Ignatius forcefully refuted this, insisting on Jesus's real incarnation, suffering, death, and bodily resurrection.

Judaizers

Taught that Gentile Christians must observe Mosaic Law for salvation. The Epistle of Barnabas and others argued that Christ fulfilled the Law, making such observance unnecessary for justification.

Gnosticism

Emerging Gnostic ideas claimed salvation through secret knowledge rather than faith in Christ. The Fathers emphasized that salvation comes through Christ alone, accessible to all who believe.

Defending Orthodox Christology



The Apostolic Fathers' response to Christological heresies established patterns of orthodox belief that would be formally articulated in later ecumenical creeds. Their defense centered on several key affirmations:

1. **True Incarnation:** The eternal Son of God truly became human, born of the Virgin Mary
2. **Real Suffering:** Christ genuinely experienced human suffering and death on the cross
3. **Physical Resurrection:** Jesus rose bodily from the dead and appeared to witnesses
4. **Continuing Deity:** The incarnation did not diminish Christ's divine nature or attributes

These affirmations, grounded in Scripture and apostolic testimony, protected the gospel's integrity against distortion.



CHAPTER BREAK

Practical Applications for Today

Lessons for Contemporary Ministry



Faithful Teaching

Like the Apostolic Fathers, pastors and teachers today must prioritize accurate transmission of apostolic doctrine grounded in Scripture, guarding against doctrinal drift and heresy.



Church Unity

Unity centered on biblical truth remains essential. We must pursue peace and reconciliation while refusing to compromise on foundational doctrines of the faith.



Courageous Witness

The martyrs' example challenges us to value faithfulness to Christ above comfort, reputation, or even physical safety in contexts where following Jesus costs something.



Intentional Discipleship

The emphasis on catechesis and moral formation reminds us that making disciples involves thorough instruction in Christian faith and ethics, not mere intellectual assent.

How to Study the Apostolic Fathers as Evangelicals

01

Scripture as Standard

Always evaluate their teachings against biblical authority. Where they align with Scripture, learn from them; where they diverge, recognize the limitation of even godly early Christian writers.

03

Wisdom and Caution

Appreciate their pastoral wisdom and theological insights while maintaining critical discernment. They were faithful believers but not inspired Scripture writers.

02

Historical Context

Understand their cultural, theological, and ecclesiastical context. They addressed specific challenges in their time and place, not all of which directly apply today.

04

Application Today

Ask how their experiences, challenges, and solutions inform contemporary ministry, apologetics, discipleship, and Christian living in a post-Christian culture.

Key Takeaways for Ministry Leaders

Guard the Gospel

The Apostolic Fathers model vigilant defense of core Christian doctrine. Ministry leaders must know Scripture deeply and recognize threats to gospel truth, responding with both conviction and grace.

Prioritize Discipleship

Early Christian formation emphasized comprehensive instruction in faith and practice. We must recover intentional, substantive discipleship that produces mature, biblically grounded believers.

Model Faithful Endurance

The martyrs demonstrate that authentic Christian witness may require costly sacrifice. Leaders must exemplify commitment to Christ that values eternal reward above temporal comfort.

Maintain Biblical Authority

Even helpful traditions and early church writings must submit to Scripture's supreme authority. Sola Scriptura safeguards against elevating human tradition to divine authority.

Resources for Further Study

Primary Sources

- *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (edited by Michael W. Holmes)
- *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers* (Penguin Classics edition)
- Online: Christian Classics Ethereal Library (CCEL) provides free access to many texts

Secondary Sources

- *Reading the Apostolic Fathers* by Clayton N. Jefford
- *The Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction* by Simon Gathercole
- Various commentaries and historical theology textbooks



Study Tip

When reading the Apostolic Fathers, keep your Bible open. Notice how they use Scripture, where they align with biblical teaching, and where questions arise. This practice develops discernment and deepens your understanding of both the texts and Scripture itself.

Conclusion: Learning from Our Spiritual Ancestors

The Apostolic Fathers provide a window into the faith, struggles, and witness of the earliest post-apostolic Christian communities. Their writings demonstrate courageous commitment to Christ, passionate defense of biblical truth, and practical wisdom for Christian living and ministry.

As Evangelical Protestants, we honor these spiritual ancestors while maintaining the Reformation principle of Sola Scriptura. Their testimony encourages us to remain faithful to apostolic teaching preserved in Scripture, to defend the gospel against distortion, and to live courageously for Christ regardless of cost.

May we, like them, faithfully pass on the apostolic faith "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), grounding our teaching and practice in the inspired, inerrant, and all-sufficient Word of God. To God alone be the glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord, in the power of the Holy Spirit, now and forevermore. Amen.