

Introduction to the Fathers

I. Overview

A. Definition

1. Early Christian writers of ancient period (to 590)
2. “Orthodox”
3. Alleged witnesses to Catholic tradition

B. Divisions

1. Ante-Nicene Fathers
 - a. Apostolic Fathers
 - b. The Greek Apologists
 - c. School of Asia Minor (Polemicists)
 - d. School of Alexandria
 - e. School of North Africa
2. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
 - a. Greek Fathers
 - b. Latin Fathers

C. Influence of Greek Philosophy

1. Charge: Fathers mixed early “primitive” Christianity with Greek philosophy to produce a religion that differed from teaching of Christ
2. Two considerations:
 - a. The fact that a concept held by the church is similar to a concept in Greek philosophy may only mean that the church found a useful match in ideas.
 - b. All concepts must be expressed in words & often need explanation

II. The Apostolic Fathers

A. Definition

1. In theory, students of the apostles themselves (e.g., Ignatius, Polycarp) or at least students of their students
2. 2nd-century figures w/ a few who perhaps date from the end of the 1st century
3. Roger Olson observes that there is more of James than Paul in the Apostolic Fathers—a blend of moralism and legalism more than grace.
4. Works are occasional and personal (i.e., sought to deal with some particular question or problem; none really systematic.)

B. Clement of Rome

1. Life
 - a. Bishop of Rome, c. AD 95
 - b. Wrote an Epistle to the Corinthians: Advised an unruly, divided congregation in Corinth (cf. Paul) → Lacks “papal authority”?
2. Specific points of interest
 - a. One of the few refs. to justification by faith in the Fathers
 - b. Advances the “compartmental view” of Hades
 - c. First ref. to deaths of Peter & Paul

C. Ignatius of Antioch

1. Life
 - a. Bishop of Antioch being taken to Rome c. AD 110
 - b. “School of St. John” in Asia Minor w/ Polycarp, Papias, and Irenaeus (alleged to have been a student of John)

- c. Traditionally, put to death under Trajan
 - d. “Martyr complex”: Ignatius displays an unhealthy desire for martyrdom (e.g., asking the Romans not to intercede for him)
 - e. Perhaps the most important Apostolic Father, because he tells us the most about the second century church.
2. Writings: Seven epistles to different churches
 3. Specific points of interest
 - a. Opposed heresy, particularly Docetism and the Judaizers (“It is monstrous to talk of Jesus Christ and practice Judaism.”)
 - b. First use of the terms “Christianity” and “Catholic Church”
 - c. Stresses bishop and monarchical episcopacy (perhaps first)
 - d. Emphasis on the Eucharist with an apparent belief in the real presence (cf. his condemnation of Gnostics “because they allow not that the eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ”)
- D. Polycarp of Smyrna
1. Life
 - a. Bishop of Smyrna, martyred c. 160
 - b. A student of the apostle John and teacher of Irenaeus
 2. Known through three writings
 - a. Letter from Ignatius to him (“Stand thou firm, as an anvil when it is smitten”)
 - b. Letter from Polycarp to the Philippians
 - c. “The Martyrdom of Polycarp”
 - 1) Famous early example of a martyrology
 - 2) First traces of the idea of relics in the preserving of his bones
- E. Papias of Hierapolis
1. Life
 - a. Bishop of Hierapolis, active c. 80-160
 - b. Reputed to be a hearer of Apostle John & an acquaintance of Polycarp of Smyrna
 - c. Known only through various fragments quoted by other writers
 2. Papias provides several highly suggestive nuggets about NT history
 - a. Appears to distinguish between the Apostle John and John the elder
 - b. On the Gospels, he reported that Matthew wrote his Gospel in Hebrew and that Mark based his Gospel on the preaching of Peter
 - c. He was a premillennialist who credits to Christ a saying about the incredible fruitfulness of the Millennium
 - d. Sometimes credited with preserving the account of Christ and the woman taken in adultery in John 8
 - e. Account of death of Judas
- F. *Didache*
1. Dates vary (c. AD 75 to 150 or later); place of origin uncertain (Syria? Egypt?)
 2. *Didache* or “Teaching” (more properly “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles”)
 3. Two sections
 - a. A primitive manual of Christian life (1-6)
 - b. A primitive manual of church order (7-16)
 4. Points of significance
 - a. Uses “presbyter” (elder) and “bishop” (overseer) interchangeably

- b. Gives a full discussion of the Eucharist (“thanksgiving”) and the prayers used with it; refers to it as a “sacrifice”
- c. Defines method of baptism: In the name of the Trinity, & then in running water → but if no running water is available, then in “other water”; in cold water → but if none is available, then in warm; but if none of these are available, then pour water three times in the name of the Trinity

G. Barnabas

- 1. Assumed to have been written in Alexandria anywhere from AD 80 to 130
- 2. In the earliest refs. the author is referred to as the Barnabas who accompanied Paul. This is certainly untrue, although it is not clear whether “Barnabas” is a pseudonym or another man of that name.
- 3. Typical of “Alexandrian” school in use of allegory/type, especially in interpreting the OT
- 4. Some see anti-Jewish emphasis in the way it reduces all Jewish practices of OT (sacrifices, circumcision) as misunderstanding & misapplications of what God “really” meant—transition from Jewish to Gentile Christianity

H. Hermas

- 1. Written c. AD 100-150, apparently from Rome
- 2. “Hermas” is unknown other than his work *Shepherd of Hermas* (the “shepherd” being the angelic spokesman)
- 3. An allegorical apocalypse
- 4. Structure: five visions, twelve mandates (commandments) and ten parables
- 5. Points of interest
 - a. Teaches forgiveness for one post-baptismal sin but not a second (underscores its legalistic nature and stress on penance)
 - b. Teaches “works of supererogation,” i.e., works that exceed what is required for righteousness

III. The Greek Apologists

A. Definition

- 1. Defensive
- 2. Also written in response to critics, notably Celsus
- 3. Apologies were often addressed to emperors to persuade them that Christians should not be persecuted.
- 4. Often relied on a knowledge and use of philosophy

B. Aristides

- 1. Second century, from Athens
- 2. Earliest surviving apology
- 3. Addressed to Antoninus Pius (138-61)
- 4. His method is to show the failures and weaknesses of the religions of the barbarians, Greeks, and Jews and contrasting them with Christianity

C. *Epistle to Diognetus*

- 1. Dates from the second century
- 2. Author unknown (“Mathetes” = “disciple”); addressed to “Diognetus” (possibly Stoic tutor to Marcus Aurelius)
- 3. Pleads for the superiority of Christianity (doctrinally, morally) and the harmlessness of its adherents

D. Tatian

1. From Nisibis, active in Rome c. 150-60
 2. Student of Justin Martyr
 3. Said to have lapsed into a form of Gnostic heresy after Justin's death, forsaking marriage and meat and using water instead of wine in the Lord's Supper
 4. *Address to the Greeks* is his apology in which he defends Christianity and ridicules the myths and philosophies of the Greeks → whatever is good in the philosophers they borrowed from the OT (e.g., Homer borrowed from Moses)
 5. *Diatessaron* ("a harmony of four parts")
- E. Athenagoras
1. Second century, from Athens
 2. Apology (or *Plea for Christians*) addressed to the emperors Marcus Aurelius & Commodus and vindicates Christians from charges of atheism, cannibalism, & incest
 3. His *On the Resurrection of the Dead* proves from reason (not Scripture) the possibility of the resurrection of the dead (cf. Paul in Athens in Acts 17)
- F. Justin Martyr
1. Lived c. 100-165 in Palestine
 2. Most important of 2nd century apologists & perhaps the first theologian of the church
 3. Biography
 - a. Student of philosophy, he sampled several before settling on Platonism
 - b. He encountered an elderly Christian while walking near the sea, however, who led him to Christ by means of the OT prophets, whom he put above the philosophers
 - c. Martyred during a wave of persecution in Rome
 4. Saw Judaism and Greek philosophy as both preparing for the coming of Christ, providing two main emphases to his apologetic:
 - a. The testimony of the Old Testament prophets
 - b. Christianity as the true philosophy
 5. Major Writings
 - a. *First and Second Apologies*: Addressed to Antoninus Pius (138-161) & directed to the heathen
 - b. *Dialogue with Trypho*: Prove Christ as Messiah from OT
 6. Points of Significance
 - a. In some ways, he was a "Christian philosopher"
 - 1) Argued that philosophy uncovered and reflected divine ideals and truths. Christianity is the true philosophy (natural theology)
 - 2) Extensive use of "logos" concept to portray Christ as the intermediate between a transcendent God and creation
 - 3) Paralleled Christ to Socrates ("Socrates was a Christian as well as Abraham, though he did not know it.")
 - 4) Saw inherent value in philosophy: "Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of Christian" (*Second Apology*)
 - b. He stresses types (which have a historical reality) more than allegory
 - c. He was a premillennialist.