

The Patristic Age, Part 1

Historical Theology

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REVIEW:

Acts 1:8

but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and Samaria, and as far as the remotest part of the earth.

As we study Church History (Historical Theology), it is good for us to understand how to apply the knowledge we gain. This isn't like studying Scripture. In Bible study, we read a verse, understand it and seek to obey it.

1. History is descriptive not prescriptive.

We look for facts, but those facts don't provide objective truth to be obeyed. Nevertheless, they do provide perspective. As we move away from biblical accounts of church history, it would be good for us to let history provide the context for our opinions rather than letting our opinions shape our understanding of history.

INTRODUCTION

That is why it is good for us to understand the Early Church Fathers in proper context.

It is in this period that we will see a transition from premillennial eschatology to amillennial eschatology, from believers baptism in a pool to infant baptism from a baptismal font, the transition from plurality of elders in a church to a monarchical bishopric.

While we could judge these and other trends, it would be good for us to first understand how they came about.

2. Events shape theology and theology shapes events.

The first period of the church after the death of the apostles was known as the *Patristic Age*. It lasted from AD100 to somewhere between AD300 and AD500. The conversion of Emperor Constantine (Early AD300s) began the transition from one era to another, but the church still operated much the same way until the Fall of Rome in AD476.

The first part of this era is known as the Apostolic Fathers. These were people who had been directly connected to an Apostle.

2 Timothy 2:2

The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful people who will be able to teach others also.

I. CLEMENT OF ROME, AD 33-100

Clement was either the second or the fourth pastor of Rome, the Roman Catholic Church would call him the fourth pope, but he definitely was not that by any reasonable understanding of the times.

He lived from sometime around the death of Christ until the end of the 1st century. Nevertheless, he is included in our history of the 2nd century because he was not an apostle, but someone trained by an apostle and continuing an apostle's work after the apostle had died.

Clement was a disciple of Paul and perhaps Peter. He may have been the Clement mentioned in Philippians 4:3. Much of what we know of Clement

comes from his letter to the Corinthians, the only authenticated writing we have from him.

What is interesting in his writing is that while Rome would claim him for their fourth Pope, there is no evidence of a monarchical hierarchy in the church. Also interesting in his writings is a theology reminiscent of his mentors.

I Clement 30:3

Let us cleave, therefore, to them to whom grace has been given from God. Let us clothe ourselves with concord, being humble, temperate, keeping ourselves far from all whispering and evil speaking, justified by our deeds, and not by our words.

I Clement 32:3, 4

All these, therefore, have been glorified and magnified, not through themselves or through their works, or through the righteousness that they have done, but through his will. And we who through his will have been called in Christ Jesus are justified, not by ourselves, or through our wisdom or understanding or godliness, or the works that we have done in holiness of heart, but by faith, by which all men from the beginning have been justified by Almighty God, to whom be glory world without end. Amen.

Another note of interest: This is a book roughly the size of Daniel, but it mentions election eleven times.

II. POLYCARP, AD 69-155

Polycarp lived in Smyrna and was mentored by John. He was a mentor to Irenaeus. He wrote a letter to the Philippians, which you can still read today.

Much of what we know about Polycarp is found in the writing, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*.

We don't know who wrote the book, nor exactly when it was written, but everyone agrees that it was written within 10 years of his martyrdom.

We do know that the early Christians kept lists of martyrs, but often legends surround the martyrdom of the saints. It is said that

miraculously, the flames were not consuming Polycarp so that he had to finally be dispatched with a sword.

III. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, AD ?-155

Ignatius was a disciple of John and a pastor at Antioch. All of what we know about him was from seven letters that he wrote. In one letter to the Smyrnans, he promoted a monarchical church government based perhaps on the organization of a synagogue. He also wrote *The Letter to the Magnesians*. This was to combat Judaizers.

He wrote his seven letters on his way to Rome to be martyred. We believe from his writings that he may have been expecting martyrdom from beasts in the colosseum.

Letter to the Ephesians 7:2

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 passible and then impassible, even Jesus Christ our Lord.

IV. PAPIAS OF HEIRAPOLIS, AD 60-130

Papius was a disciple of John. He wrote a five volume work on the sayings of Christ which we no longer have, but which was extensively quoted by Irenaeus and Eusebius. Irenaeus was a contemporary of Papius and spoke of his friendship with Polycarp. Eusebius was a historian several hundred years later who wrote of him as a witness to apostolic traditions, but considered him of low intellect because Papius believed in a literal Millennial Kingdom.

V. OTHER WRITINGS

This early church period was a time of considerable writing. Many of the writings have been discovered through archeology. Not only do we have letters and writings from the early fathers, but we also have what is known as the New Testament Apocrypha and heretical books as well.

These books were not considered Scripture by the church. There was a clear distinction in the minds of the early Christians between New Testament Scripture and Apocrypha. However, sometimes these books were used in personal devotions, church liturgy, and sometimes Christians were led astray by heretical writings claiming to be from one apostle or another.

A. THE SHEPHERD OF HERMAS, AD150?

B. THE EPISTLE OF BARNABAS, AD130

C. THE DIDACHE, late first century?

VI. HERETICS

Heretic

a person who differs in opinion from established religious dogma

A. THE EBIONITES

B. THE MARCION

A. THE EBIONITES

C. MANICHEUS

D. MONTANUS

CONCLUSION

We are indebted to the Fathers for how they faithfully defended and upheld the faith that was handed down to them. We see how they formulated theology and affirm much of what they taught.

Even so, they were very dependent on the New Testament. In the writings we have they quoted the New Testament 32,000 times. There are only 8000 verses in the New Testament. You could almost recreate a New Testament from their writings.

You can defend sound theology from their writings, but we must take them for who they are. They are not inspired. We look to them as those who affirm what the New Testament teaches, but when they deviate, we go with the Bible, not with them.

Their writings were for their time and should be understood as such. We don't want to be like the Roman Catholic Church who both uses the Fathers to build their theology and impose their Church systems back onto them.