



McKenzie Study Center, an Institute of Gutenberg College

Handout 9

The Bible and the History of Ideas

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The Early Church Fathers

100 AD–350 AD

A. APOSTOLIC FATHERS (writings of the very late first and early second century).

Apostolic Fathers are those who allegedly were alive before the last of the apostles died. *According to tradition*, each of them was himself a disciple of one or more of the apostles and, therefore, was instrumental in passing down to the Church an accurate, authoritative witness to the content of the apostolic teaching. Tradition identifies many of these men with personages in the New Testament.

1. Cast of characters and their writings (according to tradition)

- a. Barnabas
 - i. *Companion of Paul mentioned in the book of Acts.*
 - ii. *The epistle attributed to him is doubtful—Epistle of Barnabas.*
- b. Hermas
 - i. *The individual mentioned in Romans 16:14.*
 - ii. *Doubtful that he is the composer of The Shepherd of Hermas.*
- c. Clement of Rome
 - i. *Paul’s fellow-worker mentioned in Philippians 4:3.*
 - ii. *Bishop or presbyter in Rome.*
 - iii. *Clement’s epistles to the Corinthians are probably authentic.*
- d. Polycarp
 - i. *Bishop of Smyrna.*
 - ii. *Reputedly a disciple of the apostle John*
 - iii. *Epistles of Polycarp.*
- e. Papias
 - i. *Bishop of Heirapolis.*
 - ii. *Reputedly a disciple of the apostle John.*

- f. Ignatius
 - i. *Bishop of Antioch.*
 - ii. Epistles of Ignatius.
- g. Writings from this era—in addition to those mentioned above:
 - i. Epistle to Diognetes—*unknown authorship, but Justin Martyr is the author according to tradition.*
 - ii. *The Didache—unknown authorship.*

2. Theological/doctrinal trends of these writings:

- a. Redemption
 - i. *Different emphases by different authors:*
 - (A) Jesus' death involved our freedom from sin and death; but how it does so is left vague and unexplained.
 - (B) Jesus' incarnate life was for the purpose of revealing the father and teaching a new moral law to us. Redemption comes from our learning the new way to live.
 - (C) Jesus' death procures for us the grace of repentance, opens up the way to a new obedience, and therefore makes salvation possible.
- b. Sacraments
 - i. *The means by which the blessings of salvation are communicated to believers.*
 - ii. *Baptism:*
 - (A) It begets new life.
 - (1) It secures forgiveness for all sins (or, for Hermas and Clement, for all *past* sins).
 - iii. *Lord's supper*
 - (A) It communicates blessed immortality, or eternal life.
- c. Theology
 - i. *God is the creator and ruler of the universe; Jesus Christ was active in the creation of the world.*
 - ii. *They tend to have an implicit (or inchoate) belief in the Trinity and in the incarnation; but there is no conscious working out of a Trinitarian or Christological theory.*
- d. Faith
 - i. *Different emphases by different authors:*
 - (A) Faith is a true knowledge of God.
 - (B) Faith is a confidence in God.
 - (C) Faith is the commitment of oneself to God.

- e. Justification / salvation
 - i. *Faith is only the first step in a way of life on which moral development of the individual depends; the emphasis is on moral development as the basis for justification/salvation.*
 - ii. *Man merits his blessing by his good works (once forgiveness has been granted in baptism and apprehended by faith).*
- f. Christianity (at its essence) is a new law, the law of love.
- g. Church
 - i. *Increasingly they viewed the Church as an institution with authority.*
(A) The Church has a structure from which people within the institution derive their authority in accordance with their role.

3. Assessment of the Apostolic fathers

- a. Not a particularly good, accurate, nor profound grasp of the apostolic faith (when we compare it to the apostolic writings in the New Testament themselves).
 - i. *There is vagueness and/or inaccuracy in their presentation of the basic doctrines of the gospel itself.*
 - ii. *Their writings are very anemic and insubstantial by comparison to the New Testament writings.*
- b. They are moving away from apostolic Christianity and toward early Catholicism.
- c. There is a COMMON FALLACY: namely, that greater antiquity entails greater accuracy in the sense of greater faithfulness to the apostles.
 - i. *Notice that Christians in the very lifetime of the apostles were redefining Christianity into something that the apostles opposed. Most of the writings of the N.T. were written to “correct” the false beliefs and understandings of individuals that the apostles had personally instructed earlier.*

B. Other Early Church Fathers: cast of characters and their writings.

[Note that the categories overlap. A Church Father can be classed as an “Apologist” and as an “Alexandrian Father” at the same time.]

1. The Apologists (120–220 AD)

- a. Greek Apologists
 - i. *Aristides (second century)*
 - ii. *Justin Martyr (100-165AD)*
 - iii. *Tatian (disciple of Justin) (110-172 AD)*
 - iv. *Athenagoras (second century)*
 - v. *Theophilus (late second century)*
 - vi. *Origen (third century)*

- b. Latin Apologists
 - i. *Minucius Felix (second or third century)*
- 2. Anti-Gnostic Fathers (170–220 AD)**
 - a. Tertullian (170?–220? AD)
 - i. *“What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?”*
 - b. Irenaeus (175-195 AD)
- 3. Alexandrian Fathers**
 - a. Clement of Alexandria (one generation before Origen) (155-220 AD)
 - b. Origen (185–254 AD)
- 4. Doctrines / Issues / Themes in the Apologists, Anti-Gnostic, and Alexandrian Fathers.**
 - a. Christianity is the TRUE PHILOSOPHY, Platonism before Plato.
 - i. *Logos doctrine (shared with Platonism).*
 - b. Attitude toward Greek philosophy
 - i. *There existed a love/hate relationship; a tension.*
 - c. Atonement
 - i. *Jesus’ death was a ransom to devil.*
 - ii. *Conquering of evil through recapitulation / imitation (Irenaeus).*
 - d. Salvation
 - i. *Deification (Clement / Origen).*
 - ii. *Downplay crucifixion; salvation results from following Jesus’ example.*
 - (A) Theophilus
 - (B) Irenaeus
- 5. Assessment of the Apologists, Anti-Gnostic, and Alexandrian fathers**
 - a. Syncretistic / Eclectic.
 - i. *Their theology is speculative.*
 - ii. *They fill in the gaps in the biblical revelation with respect to their questions about speculative philosophy from the philosophical doctrines which are current in their day and age.*
 - (A) Trinitarian controversy.
 - b. Ritualistic tendencies.
 - i. *A function of the religious/philosophical environment in which they live.*
 - ii. *Sacramentalism.*

- c. Creedalistic in orientation.
 - i. *This is a misplaced orientation vis-à-vis the existentialist orientation of the N.T.*
 - ii. *Belief is made intellectual (Platonic influence) rather than existential in import.*
- d. Shift of locus of authority away from where the locus of authority lies in the N.T.
 - i. *In these Church Fathers: locus of authority is evolving along three different lines:*
 - (A) The Bishop.
 - (B) A Creed / Confession.
 - (C) The Canon of the Scriptures.
 - ii. *In the N.T.: locus of authority is in the true message, the true revelation itself.*
 - (A) The Gospel is that which comes with authority because it is the truth from God.
 - iii. *In the N.T., authority is conceived as a subjective response to an objective message with objective content; in the Church Fathers, authority is conceived as entirely external.*
 - (A) In N.T. view, the divine inspiration and authority of a writing or message is ultimately self-authenticating to a true child of God in the following sense: if a writing or message is profoundly and significantly compatible with the gospel that Jesus taught to his apostles (and that we who are true children of God have had our hearts attuned to), then the true child of God will recognize it as a message that is a true and reliable manifestation of revealed truth.
 - iv. *Tendency to see salvation as coming from the Christian religion and the Christian Church rather than from God in accordance with the gospel story (à la the New Testament).*

C. The Early Church Fathers were a transition from biblical (apostolic) belief in the gospel to early Christianity.

1. Elements of the development from biblical (apostolic) faith to early Christianity:

- a. We see a transition from using language and concepts grounded in Judaism and Old Testament teaching [apostolic faith] to language and concepts grounded in Greek philosophy, metaphysical speculation, and Hellenism [early Christianity].
- b. We see a transition from understanding “faith” as an existential commitment [apostolic faith] to understanding “faith” as loyalty to a social group and/or an institution [early Christianity].
- c. We see a transition from understanding “faith” as a subjective, existential commitment [apostolic faith] to understanding “faith” as explicit intellectual assent to a body of doctrines [early Christianity].
- d. We see a transition from understanding one’s authority as resting in the apostolic teaching contained in the N.T. [apostolic faith] to understanding one’s authority as resting in the authority of the Church—as that which had the authority to transmit the apostolic teaching to us [early Christianity]. {We see a transition from DIRECT access

- to apostolic teaching [apostolic faith] to INDIRECT access to apostolic teaching [early Christianity].}
- e. We see a transition from understanding Christian truth as given in the message of Jesus and the apostles [apostolic faith] to Christian truth as discovered and transmitted by the authorities in the Church (who can, by metaphysical speculation, articulate “new” insights into the truth of Christianity) [early Christianity]. {We see a transition from a CLOSED body of teaching [apostolic faith] to an OPEN body of teaching [early Christianity].}
 - f. We see a transition from the basis for belief in the gospel being one’s own individual conviction that Jesus is the *Messiah* and that his message and teachings come from God [apostolic faith] to a basis for belief in the “truth” of Christianity being a cultural consensus that the Church and its institutions speak for God [early Christianity].
 - g. We see a transition from understanding one’s credentials as a child of God being one’s inward orientation—that is, one’s subjective, existential commitment to the things of God (apostolic faith)—to understanding one’s credentials as a child of God being one’s explicit loyalty to the doctrinal creeds [early Christianity].
 - h. We see a transition from understanding that Jesus is the one to whom God has granted authority to grant Life [apostolic faith] to an understanding that the Church is the one to whom God has granted authority to grant Life [early Christianity].
 - i. We see a transition from promoting belief in the gospel through a personal appeal to each individual to make a free choice [apostolic faith] to promoting Christian belief (and defining Christian belief) through coercive, social pressures [early Christianity].
 - j. We see a transition from a deep, profound analysis of the human condition and human sin [apostolic faith] to a shallow and superficial analysis of the human condition and human sin [early Christianity].
 - k. We see a transition from an intelligent and rational understanding of the meaning and effect of Jesus’ death (understood in the context of its Jewish background) [apostolic faith] to a shallow and superficial understanding of the meaning and effect of Jesus’ death (understood in the context of Greek philosophy and pagan magical ideas) [early Christianity].
 - l. We see a transition from Christianity as the story of God’s merciful rescue from death [apostolic faith] to Christianity as the TRUE philosophy (as Platonism before Plato) [early Christianity].
 - m. We see a transition from understanding God’s “temple” as being located in the people of God (believers) [apostolic faith] to an understanding of God’s “temple” as being located in the church (the building) [early Christianity].
 - n. We see a transition from understanding discipleship to Jesus as wise, righteous living in the context of the truth of the gospel [apostolic faith] to an understanding of Christian practice as engaging in ritualistic worship and religious piety [early Christianity].

- o. We see a transition from profound insight into the realities of human rebellion against God vis-à-vis God’s will for human beings [apostolic faith] to shallow moralism and superficial God-speak [early Christianity].
 - p. We see a transition from the supernatural grace of God being the work of the transcendent God in an individual’s life [apostolic faith] to the supernatural grace of God being magical effects brought about by magical means (e.g., sacramentalism) [early Christianity].
 - q. We see a transition from understanding true spirituality as being an inward, moral re-orientation [apostolic faith] to understanding true spirituality as being a renunciation of all things material and physical (i.e., asceticism) [early Christianity].
 - r. We see a transition from understanding the mark of a belief’s truth being its conformity to what Jesus and the apostles taught (that is, its conformity to the Bible’s teaching) [apostolic faith] to understanding the mark of a belief’s truth being the longevity and antiquity of its acceptance by the Church (i.e., its conformity to tradition) [early Christianity].
 - s. We see a transition from understanding salvation to result from contrite acceptance of God’s mercy [apostolic faith] to understanding salvation to result from moral reformation (and commitment to moral living), following the example of Jesus [early Christianity].
 - t. We see a transition from understanding Jesus’ death as a meaningful event that poses an existential crisis for every human being [apostolic faith] to understanding Jesus’ death as a magical event [early Christianity].
 - u. We see a transition from believing that Jesus is the Messiah, the ordinary human being who embodies in his very person the authority and identity of God himself, [apostolic faith] to believing that Jesus is the very essence of God himself, appearing in the form of a human being [early Christianity].
2. **The Early Church Fathers took biblical themes, concepts, and language and created from them a new, syncretistic religion. Christianity is not the same thing as biblical “faith,” expanded and developed. The Christianity they developed is a competing religion that is different from biblical faith.**