

Who's Your Daddy?

The Church Fathers and the Development of Scripture, Worship, and Leadership in the Early Church

WHEN:

Brief Timeline of Early Church:

60-135?	Papias
64	Great Fire of Rome
64-8	Nero's punishment of the Christians
70	Destruction of the temple in Jerusalem
70-135	<i>Letter of Barnabas</i>
95?	<i>1 Clement</i>
96?	<i>2 Clement</i>
100?	<i>The Didache</i>
100-165	Justin Martyr
110	Martyrdom of Ignatius
110-40?	<i>The Shepherd of Hermas</i>
130-200	Irenaeus of Lyons
150-90	<i>Letter to Diognetus</i>
155?	Martyrdom of Polycarp
160-225	Tertullian
303-312	The "Great Persecution"
312	Conversion of emperor Constantine
325	Council of Nicea

WHAT:

- **Practices of the Church**

- The Lord's Day
 - The main point was to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and the promises of which that resurrection was the seal.
- Baptism
 - This is how to baptize. Give public instruction on all these points, and then 'baptize' in running water, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." If you do not have running water, baptize in some other. If you cannot in cold, then in warm. If you have neither, then pour water on the head three times "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.' Before the baptism, moreover, the one who baptizes and the one being baptized must fast, and any others who can."¹
 - The first recorded mention of infant baptism comes in about 200AD from Tertullian, who condemns the practice.
- The Lord's Supper
 - At the end of our prayers, we greet one another with a kiss. Then the president of the brethren is brought a bread and a cup of wine mixed with water; and he takes them, and offers up praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and the Holy Ghost, and gives thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these things at his hands. When he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all the people present express their joyful assent by saying Amen. . . . Then those whom we call deacons give to each of those present the bread and wine mixed with water over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and carry away a portion to those who are absent. We call this food "Eucharist."²

1 "The Didache" in Richardson, Cyril C. ed. *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Touchstone 1996), pp.174-75.

2 Justin, *Apology* I 65-66, AD150

- Preaching
 - “And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president [pastor] verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.”³
- **Problems for the Church**
 - Marcion
 - Mid-second Century
 - Influenced by Plato, he taught that matter was evil but the spiritual realm was good.
 - He argued two different gods existed: the evil god of the Old Testament and the good god of the New Testament
 - He rejected the Old Testament and only accepted Luke and the writings of Paul
 - Montanists
 - Claimed to still be receiving divine revelation through their prophets.
 - Claimed also to be the culmination of history.
 - Establishing the Canon
 - “The canon of the New Testament was completed when the last authoritative book was given to any church by the apostles, and that was when John wrote the Apocalypse [Revelation], about A.D. 98...we must not mistake the historical evidences of the slow circulation and authentication of these books...[as] evidence of slowness of ‘canonization’ of books by the authority or the taste of the church itself.”⁴

WHO/WHERE:

- **Apostolic Fathers – taught by the Apostles**
 - Clement of Rome
 - Bishop of the church at Rome toward the end of the first/beginning of the 2nd century.
 - Possibly the Clement mentioned in Philippians
 - Tertullian says Clement knew Peter, but this is not certain.
 - There is one authentic piece of writing by him – 1 Clement, which is an appeal to the church at Corinth that they respect the authority of their elders, strive to live in unity, and remember that we are justified in Christ:
 - And we, too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, or understanding, or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men; to whom be glory for ever and ever.⁵
 - Ignatius of Antioch
 - Bishop of Antioch early in the 2nd century.
 - Probably knew John, and kept a long correspondence with Polycarp, who also knew John.
 - What little survives about his life is contained in seven letters that he wrote to various churches during his long journey to Rome for his martyrdom.
 - He argued that there should be only one bishop over each congregation, instead of the plurality of elders that Clement addresses in his letter to Corinth.
 - He also insisted that Christians routinely gather together as a bulwark against sin, kind of an echo of what we read several times in Hebrews:

3 Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 67.

4 B.B. Warfield, *The Formation of the Canon of the New Testament*, 415-416.

5 1 Clement, 32.

- “When you meet frequently, the powers of Satan are confounded, and in the face of your corporate faith his maleficence crumbles.”⁶
 - He was torn apart by lions in Rome in 117AD
 - Fire, cross, beast-fighting, hacking and quartering, splintering of bone and mangling of limb, even the pulverizing of my entire body – let every horrid and diabolical torment come upon me, provided only that I can win my way to Christ!⁷
- Polycarp of Smyrna (*Letter to the Philippians, Martyrdom of Polycarp*)
 - One of Ignatius’ seven letters is addressed to Polycarp.
 - He was the Bishop of the church at Smyrna.
 - He was a disciple of John.
 - One of the letters in Revelation 2-3 is addressed to the church at Smyrna.
 - He wrote several letters but only his epistle to the Philippians remains.
 - The story of his martyrdom was written by his church and is one of the earliest accounts of Christian martyrdom.
- **Apologetic Fathers**
 - Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho, First and Second Apologies*)
 - An early leader in the Eastern Church
 - He became a Christian around 132AD
 - He set out to prove the truth of Christianity to Greek philosophers.
 - He was a gifted interpreter of Scripture.
 - Justin became a martyr about 165AD when he was beheaded in Rome, probably after he had won a debate against a pagan philosopher.
 - Athenagoras of Athens
 - Another eloquent apologist in the East was Athenagoras of Athens.
 - Well-versed in pagan philosophies, Athenagoras contended for the supremacy of Christianity because it was based on direct revelation from God, rather than on the speculations of limited human reason.
 - He held that because pagan gods were created in man’s image, they were inadequate and infantile. Only the God of the Bible reigned supreme, as all wise, perfect, powerful, and good.
 - Irenaeus of Lyons (*Against Heresies*)
 - A prominent leader in the West
 - He studied under Polycarp and became Bishop of the church at Lyons, in Gaul (France) in 177AD
 - Most of his writings were against Gnosticism.
 - Gnosticism described matter as evil and the spirit as good, denied the creation of the world by one God, and claimed to possess secret knowledge, or “gnosis”, necessary to attain salvation, often by deliberately misreading passages of Scripture:
 - “By transferring passages, and dressing them up anew, and making one thing out of another, they succeed in deluding many through their wickedness and in adapting the oracles of the Lord to their opinions.”⁸
 - Irenaeus responded in his work *Against Heresies* by asserting apostolic succession – the notion that “the canon (or rule) of truth,” which had been handed down from the apostles and was now preserved in the church, provided the sole key to interpreting Scripture.

6 Ignatius., *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 13.

7 Ignatius, *Epistle to the Romans*, 5.

8 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 1

- Against the Gnostic belief that matter and flesh were evil, Irenaeus pointed out that history culminated in God taking on flesh and dwelling on earth in the person of Jesus Christ.
- Tertullian (*Apology, On Patience, On Prayer, To The Martyrs, On the Spectacles, On Idolatry, On the Flesh of Christ*)
 - The Bishop of Carthage in the West.
 - The first Christian to write extensively in Latin.
 - He was the first to use the word *trinitas*, or Trinity, to describe the nature of God as “one substance, three persons.”
 - His masterpiece was the *Apology*, in which he used precise legal reasoning to argue to Roman officials that Christianity should be tolerated.
 - He also dismissed the idea that ancient philosophy should be commingled with Christianity, writing “What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?”
 - Tertullian famously declared “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church,” as he observed the faith spreading despite violent persecution.
 - Around AD220, Tertullian joined the Montanists, a strange and heretical apocalyptic sect that claimed to be the culmination of history.
 - Here again we are reminded that even the most eminent of early church leaders were not immune from gross error.
- Clement of Alexandria
 - He served as Bishop of Alexandria until 202AD
 - He was trained in philosophy.
 - Influenced by Justin.
 - He sought to reconcile two worlds, to persuade Christians of the wisdom of Greek philosophy, and to persuade philosophers of the truth of Christianity. This led him to invent the notion of “purgatory” as a place to cleanse the soul, an idea that eventually would be adopted by the Roman Catholic Church.
 - He read Scripture as more allegorical than literal.
- Origen
 - A disciple of Clement.
 - Bishop of Alexandria
 - He proved to be a brilliant scholar and the most prolific church writer of his day, writing over 2000 works.
 - He produced the greatest work of scholarship in the early church, a massive work called the *Hexapla* that put in six parallel columns the ancient Hebrew text of the Old Testament together with five Greek translations.
 - He made the first effort to present the fundamental doctrines of Christianity in a systematic theology, and made great attempts to present the truths of Christianity in the language of the prevailing Platonic philosophy of the day.
 - Greek philosophy led him unfortunately astray, as the church condemned him for his belief in the pre-existence of souls, reincarnation, and universal salvation.
 - Origen was also reknowned for his ascetic lifestyle, for example he would spend years not wearing shoes, eating only bread and water, etc.
 - Reputable sources claim that Origen also performed an act of self-castration on himself when he took Matthew 19:12 too literally.⁹
 - He died in AD254 under the persecution of Emperor Decius after being stretched out on a torture rack.
- Cyprian of Carthage
 - He was a wealthy and influential citizen of Carthage.

- Became a Christian in 246AD.
- Cyprian came to place great emphasis on the unity and authority of the Church.
- He was the first to describe the office of the Bishop of Rome as the “Chair of Peter,” thus connecting apostolic authority with the primacy of Rome, and laying the foundation for the modern papacy.
- During the Decian persecution, he opposed those who felt that lapsed Christians should be allowed back into the church, writing his most important work, *The Unity of the Catholic Church* to combat that idea. “There is no salvation outside the Church,” he famously proclaimed.
- Died a martyr in 258AD.

Further Reading:

- This outline is adapted from a Church History Core Seminar from Capitol Hill Baptist Church.
- Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*
- Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*
- Andreas Kostenberger and Michael Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity*
- Michael Reeves, *Breeze Through the Centuries*