

CHURCH HISTORY (2): Ante-Nicene (2)

The second and third centuries are divided between the Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists. By Apostolic Fathers is meant the writings of the first generation after the apostles (90-150), and by Apologists is meant the two generations that followed them (150-300). "The period in Church history just after the death of the apostles is known as the age of the *apostolic* fathers. The name was invented in the 17th century, when scholars believed that these early Christian writers all had direct personal contact with the apostles; most historians today think that only a few of them did" (Needham).¹

I. The Apostolic Fathers

1. *A survey of major people and sources.* "The *apostolic*, or rather post-apostolic *fathers* were the first church teachers after the apostles, who had enjoyed in part personal intercourse with them, and thus form the connecting link between them and the apologists of the second century" (Schaff).² The writings of the apostolic fathers are few, practical, and rather simple. They place a large stress upon personal and ecclesiastical behavior. "The extant works of the apostolic fathers are of small compass, a handful of letters on holy living and dying, making in all a volume of about twice the size of the New Testament. Yet they still shine with the evening red of the apostolic day, and breathe an enthusiasm of simple faith and fervent love and fidelity to the Lord, which proved its power in suffering and martyrdom" (Schaff).³

(1) Clement of Rome (AD 35-99). "Clement was a disciple of Paul and Peter, to whom he refers as the chief examples for imitation. He may have been the same person mentioned by Paul in Philippians 4:3. He stood at the head of the Roman congregation from AD 92-101" (Schaff).⁴ During this time he sent a letter to the church at Corinth, which is "the oldest and best among the sub-apostolic writings both in form and content" (Schaff).⁵ "He wrote the letter to try to settle a dispute in the Corinthian church. In a conflict between the older and younger generations, the Corinthian Christians had dismissed all their elders and replaced them by new youthful leaders. Clement entreated them to restore their deposed leaders back into office" (Needham).⁶ Clement of Rome should not be confused with Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215).

(2) Ignatius of Antioch (AD 30-110). "Ignatius was the bishop of the church in Antioch at the beginning of the 2nd century. Arrested for being a Christian, he was taken to Rome by a military escort, where the authorities executed him in about AD 110" (Needham).⁷ On his way to Rome, he wrote 7 letters (6 to churches and 1 to Polycarp). In his letter to the Romans, he said: "May I enjoy the wild beasts that are prepared for me; and I pray they may be found eager to rush upon me, which also I will entice to devour me speedily, and not deal with me as with some, whom, out of fear, they have not touched. Let fire and the cross; let the crowds of wild beasts; let tearings, breakings, and dislocations of bones; let cutting off of members; let shatterings of the whole body; and let all the dreadful torments of the devil come upon me; only let me attain to Jesus Christ."⁸ In his letter to the Philippians, Polycarp said of Ignatius: "I exhort you all to yield obedience to the word of righteousness, and to exercise all patience, such as

¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:63

² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:633

³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:634-635

⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:637-638

⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:642

⁶ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:63-64

⁷ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:64

⁸ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:75-76

you seen before your eyes, not only in the case of the blessed Ignatius, but also in others among yourselves, and in Paul himself, and the rest of the apostles."⁹

(3) Polycarp (AD 70-155). "Polycarp was bishop of the church of Smyrna in Asia Minor and one of the most famous martyrs of the 2nd century" (Needham).¹⁰ He was a disciple of the apostle John, a younger friend of Ignatius, and teacher of Irenaeus (for 10 years between 130-140). "He was not so original and intellectually active as Clement or Ignatius, but a man of truly venerable character, and simple, patriarchal piety" (Schaff).¹¹ In 154 he made a journey to Rome to settle a dispute and died at the stake.

(4) The Didache (AD 100). *Didache* means "the Teaching" and contains 16 short chapters on practical living and church life. "This is the oldest surviving handbook of church discipline, dating from about AD 100. It originated from Syria, and its full title is *The Teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles through the Twelve Apostles*" (Needham).¹² "The Didache, discovered in 1873, was probably written about the year 100 A. D. The first part contains moral precepts under the scheme of the Two Ways, the way of life and the way of death, while the second part gives directions pertaining to worship and church government, interspersed with statements respecting the last things" (Berkhof).¹³

2. *A survey of apostolic theology and practice.* (1) Salvation. The apostolic fathers were orthodox on their views of the person and work of Christ. "The Apostolic Fathers are generally in harmony with the truth revealed in the Word of God, and are often represented in the very words of Scripture" (Berkhof).¹⁴ For example, in a letter to the Ephesians, Ignatius said: "The cross is indeed a stumbling-block to those that do not believe, but to the believing it is salvation and life eternal. 'Where is the wise man? Where the disputer?' Where is the boasting of those who are called mighty? For the Son of God, who was begotten before time began, and established all things according to the will of the Father, He was conceived in the womb of Mary, according to the appointment of God, the seed of David, and by the Holy Ghost."¹⁵

While no full treatment of the nature of the atonement was written in the 2nd century, apostolic fathers viewed the cross as a substitution. "By love have all the elect of God been made perfect; without love nothing is well-pleasing to God. In love has the Lord taken us to Himself. On account of the love He bore us, Jesus Christ our Lord gave His blood for us by the will of God; His flesh for our flesh, and His soul for our souls" (Clement).¹⁶ In response to the error that Christ had only the appearance of a body, Ignatius said: "But as for me, I do not place my hopes in one who died for me in appearance, but in reality."¹⁷

In pity He took our sins upon Himself and gave His own Son as ransom for us—the Holy for the wicked, the Sinless for sinners, the Just for the unjust, the Incorruptible for the corruptible, the Immortal for the mortal. For was there, indeed, anything except His righteousness that could have availed to cover our sins? In whom could we, in our lawlessness and ungodliness, have been made holy, but in the Son of God alone? O sweet

⁹ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:35

¹⁰ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:66

¹¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:665

¹² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:64

¹³ Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrine*, 24-25

¹⁴ Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrine*, 25

¹⁵ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:56-57

¹⁶ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:18

¹⁷ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:70

exchange! O unsearchable working! O benefits unhopd for! – that the wickedness of multitudes should thus be hidden in the One righteous, and the righteousness of One should justify the countless wicked.¹⁸

Salvation is attributed to faith and not works. "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 Amen" (Clement).¹⁹ "Thus, then, they who are of faith shall be blessed with faithful Abraham, and these are the children of Abraham. Now God made promise of the earth to Abraham and his seed; yet neither Abraham nor his seed, that is, those who are justified by faith, do now receive any inheritance in it; but they shall receive it at the resurrection of the just. For God is true and faithful; and on this account He said, 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth'" (Irenaeus).²⁰

(2) Public worship. The early church kept the first day of the week as holy. "We keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead" (Barnabas).²¹ "Let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day as a festival, the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days of the week" (Ignatius).²² "On the Lord's Day, gather yourselves together and break bread, give thanks, but first confess your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure" (Didache).²³ "Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that (Saturday), and on the first day, He appeared to His apostles and disciples" (Justin).²⁴ "She (the early church) regarded Sunday as a sacred day, as the Day of the Lord, as the weekly commemoration of His resurrection and the Pentecostal effusion of the Spirit, and therefore as a day of holy joy and thanksgiving to be celebrated even before the rising sun by prayer, praise, and communion with the risen Lord and Savior" (Schaff).²⁵ The early church took public worship seriously. "Do not neglect the sacred meetings of the saints" (Ignatius).²⁶ It was plain worship, wherein the Bible was read and preached, public prayers were made, and the sacraments celebrated.

On the day of our Lord's resurrection, which is the Lord's Day, meet more diligently, morning and evening, sending praise to God that made the universe by Jesus, and sent Him to us, and condescended to let Him suffer, and raised Him from the dead. Otherwise, what apology will he make to God who does not assemble on that day to hear the saving word concerning the resurrection, in which is performed the reading of the prophets, the preaching of the Gospel, the gift of the holy food.²⁷

(3) Church government. "The main issue the Christian community had to decide in the age of the apostolic fathers was the question of leadership: who was to govern and guide the churches now that the

¹⁸ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:28

¹⁹ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:13

²⁰ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:315

²¹ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:133

²² Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:63

²³ 14:1

²⁴ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:163

²⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:201

²⁶ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:63

²⁷ Ante-Nicene Fathers, *The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, 7:422-423

apostles were all dead" (Needham)?²⁸ The NT speaks of two officers, elder and deacon. Elders (*presbuteros*) are one and the same with bishops (*episkope*). "The apostles appointed bishops and deacons, and gave a rule of succession, so that when they had fallen asleep, others, who had been approved, might succeed to their ministry" (Clement).²⁹ Early in the 2nd century, distinction was made between a bishop and elder. "Within Ignatius of Antioch, we see these two words being use to refer to distinct offices. He argued vigorously for a single leader of each church, whom he called the 'bishop', and under the bishop a team of secondary leaders, whom he called 'presbyters'" (Needham).³⁰ "Shun divisions as the beginning of evil. Follow your bishop as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and follow your presbyters as the apostles; and respect the deacons as you would respect God's commandment. Let no one do anything in the church apart from the bishop" (Ignatius).³¹ In the 4th century, Jerome admitted Scripture equates the two terms, but says the most respected elder was chosen to preside over the others. Eventually, this elder was viewed as a bishop in distinction from elder. "The NT teaches clearly that presbyters and bishops are identical. But in later times one presbyter was selected as president over the rest" (Jerome).³²

The Christian bishop seems to have begun as the president of the Christian body of elders in each local church. From that position, the status of the 'president' gradually increased in importance throughout the 2nd century. This growth in the president's status was what caused the Church to apply the title 'bishop' exclusively to him, in distinction from the other elders who were simply called 'presbyters'.³³

(4) Practical living and godliness. Most letters written in the 2nd century taught the gospel, warned of false teachers, and exhorted to practical holiness. (a) Sexual purity. "If any one can continue in a state of purity, to the honor of Lord, let him so remain without boasting. If he shall boast, he is undone; and if he seeks to be more prominent than the bishop, he is ruined. But it becomes both men and women who marry, to form their union with the approval of the bishop, that their marriage may be according to the Lord, and not after their own lust" (Ignatius).³⁴ (b) Benevolence. "The wealthy among us help the need, and we always keep together, and for all things wherewith we are supplied, we bless the Maker of all through His Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Ghost" (Justin).³⁵ (c) Christian unity. "Thus, being joined together in concord and harmonious love, of which Jesus Christ is the Captain and Guardian, do ye, man by man, become but one choir; so that, agreeing together in concord, and obtaining a perfect unity with God, ye may indeed be one in harmonious feeling with God the Father, and His beloved Son Jesus Christ our Lord" (Ignatius).³⁶

(5) Baptism and the Lord's Supper. (a) The Lord's Supper. "Compared with many churches today, the Lord's supper held a remarkably high place in early Christian worship. The local church celebrated it every Sunday and it formed a large part of the service" (Needham).³⁷ "The celebration of the Eucharist or holy communion with appropriate prayers of the faithful was the culmination of Christian worship" (Schaff).³⁸ "After prayer, the deacons give to each of those present some of the blessed bread and wine

²⁸ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:67

²⁹ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:5

³⁰ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:67

³¹ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:86

³² Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 6:288

³³ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:69

³⁴ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:95

³⁵ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:159

³⁶ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:51

³⁷ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:73

³⁸ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:235

mingled with water. This food is called with us the *eucharist*, of which none can partake, but the believing and baptized, who live according to the commands of Christ" (Justin).³⁹ "At first the communion was joined with a Love Feast (Agape Meal), but in the beginning of the 2nd century these two exercises were separated, and the communion was placed in the morning, and Love Feast in the evening" (Schaff).⁴⁰

Philip Schaff said the early church celebrated the Supper with the deepest devotion, "without inquiring into the mode of Christ's presence, nor into the relation of the sensible signs to His flesh and blood."⁴¹ He then said two things: first, the early fathers merely quoted NT passages that spoke of the bread and cup as the body and blood of Christ. In response to the Gnostics (who denied Christ had a literal body), Ignatius said, "They abstain from the Eucharist, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness, raised up again."⁴² Second, the early fathers distinguished the symbols from the essence (the bread and wine from the body and blood). "Clement twice expressly calls the wine a symbol or an allegory of the blood of Christ, and says, that the communicant receives not the physical, but the spiritual blood, the life, of Christ; as, indeed, the blood is the life of the body" (Schaff).⁴³ Other fathers preferred to refer to the elements as antitypes of Christ's body and blood. That is, they are symbols that stand in the place of Christ. "Other Greek fathers, down to the fifth century, call the consecrated elements antitypes of the body and blood of Christ" (Schaff).⁴⁴ "Offer the acceptable Eucharist, the representation of the royal body of Christ."⁴⁵

Be ye always thankful, as faithful and honest servants; and concerning the eucharistical thanksgiving say thus, 'We thank Thee, our Father, for that life which Thou has made known to us by Jesus Thy Son, by whom Thou madest all things, and takest care of the whole world; whom Thou has sent to become man for our salvation; whom Thou hast permitted to suffer and to die; whom Thou has raised up, and been pleased to glorify, and hast set Him down on Thy right hand; by whom Thou hast promised us the resurrection of the dead. We also, our Father, thank Thee for the precious blood of Jesus Christ, which was shed for us, and for His precious body, whereof we celebrate this representation, as Himself appointed us, 'to show forth His death.'⁴⁶

(b) Baptism. The *Didache* describes the mode of baptism as emersion but allows for pouring when there is not sufficient water. It was closely associated with salvation, and was eventually given an efficacious virtue by some. Cyril of Jerusalem (310-386) taught those being baptized (catechumens) that baptism had three main effects. "First, it washed away the guilt of all sins committed prior to baptism. Second, it sanctified the baptized person, by conferring on him spiritual union with Christ in His death and resurrection, the gift of the Spirit, and adoption as God's child. Third, it impressed a 'seal' of permanent mark on the soul, by virtue of which the baptized person was set apart as the Spirit's temple. Cyril's doctrine of baptism was the view held by all Christians in the 4th century, and indeed from the 150s onward" (Needham).⁴⁷

³⁹ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:185

⁴⁰ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:239

⁴¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:241

⁴² Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:89

⁴³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:245

⁴⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:243

⁴⁵ Ante-Nicene Fathers, *The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, 1:464

⁴⁶ Ante-Nicene Fathers, *The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, 1:470

⁴⁷ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:198

First, baptism was spoken of with Biblical language and imagery. They spoke of baptism as "a water-bath for the forgiveness of sins and regeneration" (Justin).⁴⁸ "Cyril and other fathers insisted that it was not the *water* of baptism that bestowed these spiritual benefits, but the Holy Spirit, who worked inwardly in the soul at the same time that the water outwardly washed the body" (Needham).⁴⁹ Second, baptism was preceded by faith and repentance. "As many are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated" (Justin).⁵⁰ "The fathers saw *acceptance of the true faith* as necessary if baptism was to be effective. The mere physical act of baptism, without true faith, was empty of value. Baptism given by heretics like the Arians, was therefore regarded by the early Church fathers as spiritual worthless" (Needham).⁵¹

Third, baptism was a means through which believers received forgiveness. As mentioned before, it was believed forgiveness came in connection with baptism and not because of baptism. "Happy is the sacrament of our water, in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free and admitted into eternal life" (Tertullian).⁵² Because of this view, baptism was often postponed to the death-bed. "Baptism was often delayed, to give the person the opportunity of having more sin washed away by baptism" (Calhoun).⁵³ "Many, like Constantine the Great, put off baptism to the bed of sickness and death, preferring the risk of dying unbaptized to that of forfeiting forever the baptismal grace. Death-bed baptisms were then what death-bed repentances are now" (Schaff).⁵⁴ As a result, the author of the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, warned against such delays: "Be ye likewise contented with one baptism alone, that which is into the death of the Lord. But, he that, out of contempt, will not be baptized, shall be condemned as an unbeliever, and shall be reproached as ungrateful and foolish (Jn.3:5; Mk.16:16). But he that says, When I am dying, I will be baptized, lest I should sin and defile my baptism, is ignorant of God, and forgetful of his own nature. For 'do not you delay to turn unto the Lord, for you know now what the next day will bring forth.'"⁵⁵

In response to these warnings, others went to the other extreme and began baptizing very young children and even infants. Thus, in his treatise *On Baptism*, written in about 200, Tertullian acknowledged that some young people and infants were being baptized, but warned against it. "And so, according to the circumstances, disposition, and age of each individual, the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children. For why is it necessary, if baptism itself is not so necessary, that the sponsors (i.e., parents) likewise should be thrust into danger? Who both themselves, by reason of mortality, may fail to fulfil their promises, and may be disappointed by the development of an evil disposition, *in those for whom they stood*? The Lord does indeed say, 'Forbid them not to come unto Me.' Let them 'come,' then, while they are growing up; let them 'come' while they are learning, while they are learning whither to come; let them become Christians (i.e., baptized) when they have become able to know Christ. If any understand the weighty import of baptism, they will fear its reception more than its delay."⁵⁶

⁴⁸ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:183

⁴⁹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:198

⁵⁰ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1:183

⁵¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:198

⁵² Ante-Nicene Fathers, 7:669

⁵³ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, Lesson 3

⁵⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:254

⁵⁵ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 7:456-457

⁵⁶ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3:678