

Theologians

YOU SHOULD KNOW



*An Introduction: From the Apostolic Fathers
to the 21st Century*



MICHAEL REEVES

“Historical theology is the study of the formulation of doctrine from the church of the past. As such, it provides a storehouse of wisdom, a wonderful legacy handed down from earlier theologians to the church today. Though hundreds of theologians contributed to this legacy, Michael Reeves introduces us to the theologians you should know. It is one of the best introductions to historical theology and its purveyors that exists!”

Gregg R. Allison, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Among our ‘great cloud of witnesses’ are monumental theologians—Augustine, Calvin, Edwards, and more—who have plumbed the depths of God’s truth, that we might know God better. *Theologians You Should Know* reintroduces these figures in a fresh, incisive, and authoritative manner.”

Thomas S. Kidd, Distinguished Professor of History, Baylor University; author, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*

“Michael Reeves helps readers engage with great Christian thinkers of the past in a critical and appreciative manner. The educated layperson and the thoughtful church leader will find themselves informed and edified by this book.”

Carl R. Trueman, Paul Woolley Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary; author, *The Creedal Imperative* and *Luther on the Christian Life*

“What a marvelous introduction to the greatest giants of the faith! Michael Reeves has done us a tremendous service by pulling back the curtain of the past and throwing open the window of history to allow, as C. S. Lewis so felicitously put it, ‘the clean sea breeze of the centuries’ to blow through our minds. From Irenaeus to Barth and Athanasius to Packer, they’re all here—a treasure trove of wisdom and insight!”

Todd Wilson, Senior Pastor, Calvary Memorial Church, Oak Park, Illinois; author, *Real Christian* and *The Pastor Theologian*

“This fascinating volume covers the massive influence of great thinkers, apologists, and ‘death wish’ martyrs, like ‘food for wild beasts’ Ignatius, the courageous alleged murderer and ‘black dwarf’ Athanasius, and the friendly giant Aquinas, all of whom faced the challenges we face. Reeves breathes life into dead men, with historical writing that’s about as good as it gets—full of interest, burningly relevant, and totally scintillating. Christians need to rediscover their roots, if only to prevent them from poisoning the church’s new shoots with ancient heresies. Ignorance is not bliss. Let Reeves tell you why.”

Greg Haslam, Senior Minister, Westminster Chapel, London

“Someone has suggested that history only repeats itself because no one bothered to listen the first time around. Reeves invites us to listen to our Christian history and to learn from it, telling the stories with energy and humor. He introduces us to great thinkers who faced questions and problems uncannily like our own, and who found answers in the Scriptures that we would do well to reflect on. This is an important and wonderfully written book that every thoughtful Christian will enjoy and will benefit greatly from.”

Steve Holmes, Senior Lecturer in Theology, University of St. Andrews

“Today, evangelical Christians too often read the Bible as if it had just dropped out of heaven, with little or no appreciation of church history. Michael Reeves offers a good corrective to this with his very readable introduction to many of the key figures and works of the early church.”

Tony Lane, Professor of Historical Theology, London School of Theology

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*Theologians You Should Know: An Introduction:
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To my dear parents,
I wrote this book for you, it being all about
learning from previous generations. I will never
cease to be full of love and gratitude for you.

And my dear Lucy,
I wrote this book for you, as from one generation
to the next. Of course you are too young for it
now, but maybe someday you can take it down
from some upper shelf, dust it, and tell me what
you think of it. And if you never do, just remember
what they say in Geneva: *Post tenebras, LUX!*

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Introduction

Snobs, Bumpkins, and Dinosaurs

C. S. Lewis was a self-confessed dinosaur. He knew perfectly well that he simply did not belong in the modern world. Yet, being born out of due time, he was able to spot what the natives could not. And what he saw in modern culture, perhaps more than anything else, was a suffocating enslavement to the beautiful myth of progress, the dream that history is evolving ever onward and upward, that newer is better.

It is the sort of belief that sits very comfortably in the subconscious, giving one the warm glow of knowing that we are faster, better, wiser, more advanced, and more knowledgeable than our parents and forebears. Yet one of the problems Lewis noticed in the myth was that such superiority tends to produce not wisdom but ignorance. If we assume that the past is inferior, we will not bother consulting it, and will thus find ourselves stranded on the tiny desert island of our moment in time. Or, as Lewis put it, we will become like the country bumpkin, full of

the cocksure conviction of an ignorant adolescent that his own village (which is the only one he knows) is the hub of the universe and does everything in the Only Right Way. For our own age, with all its accepted ideas, stands to the vast extent of historical time much as one village stands to the whole world.¹

¹C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 138.

Of course, such “chronological snobbery” does not like to admit its own existence. No snob likes to be thought of as an ignorant bumpkin. Indeed, the chronological snob will often be the first to bedeck himself with historical references. The modern writer will allude to the old. But so often it is simply a case of the living plundering the dead. The cachet of the Augustine, the Luther, the Aquinas is purloined, as sound bites from their writings are torn from their original context and pressed into the service of other arguments, or simply used as weapons in the latest theological street fight.

But what Lewis found—and what reading old books makes very clear—is that every age works with a large set of assumptions that seem to it so self-evident that they are never questioned. Like the proverbial frog in the kettle, we find it almost impossible to get a real sense of the water we inhabit, and can thus be blissfully unaware of how faddish our beliefs are. It is very tempting for me now to don the grand airs of a sage cultural critic and attempt to list what our unquestioned assumptions are today. But anyone excavating this book from the dusty bowels of some copyright library in fifty years’ time would only chuckle at the profound issues I had overlooked. They are simply part of the air we breathe every day, and as such are quite invisible to us.

What to do? “The only palliative,” said Lewis, “is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds.”² That is, we refuse to imprison ourselves in the stuffy broom cupboard of the present and safely familiar, and open up the doors to the refreshing influences of other times. And practically?

It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between. If that is too much for you, you should at least read one old one to every three new ones. . . . Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the *same* mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are

²C. S. Lewis, Introduction to *On the Incarnation*, by Athanasius (London: Centenary, 1944; repr. Crestwood, NY: SVS, 1998), 5.

unlikely to go wrong in the same direction. To be sure, the books of the future would be just as good a corrective as the books of the past, but unfortunately we cannot get at them.³

Such is the motivation behind *Theologians You Should Know*. It is that, far from turning us into *irrelevant* dinosaurs, reading old books can rescue us from bumpkinery and enlarge our vision. From other centuries we receive an enrichment we could never have through mere feeding on ourselves. And if that is true for old books in general, it is more so for the books of old theologians. Theology is something to be done corporately, by the church. But if we ignore what the bulk of the church has said down through history, then we act as schismatically as if we ignored the church on earth today. More so, in fact.

Would Not Lewis Be Appalled?

Clearly, then, this is a work built on Lewis's foundations. And yet, is this not exactly the sort of dreary modern book Lewis feared would insulate people from the health-giving breeze? Why write another new book when the aim is to have people read old ones?

But this was just why Lewis wrote so much. The fact is, theologians like Athanasius and Calvin are like famous guests of honor at a party. Most people there would love to have some time with them, but few dare to approach them without a polite introduction. And providing a few introductions to fascinating but potentially intimidating celebrity theologians is the aim of these pages.

In that sense, while there might seem to be an insane arrogance to the thought of trying to squeeze such titans into so few pages, this is actually a work that makes no great pretenses. Rather, it seeks to do itself out of a job by leading readers on to better books than this. For that reason I will not spend time pontificating on "Anselm's view of God" or "Barth's view of Scripture"—to do so could leave readers just as frightened of approaching the great men for themselves, perhaps more so. Instead, I will try to intrude as little as possible, simply letting the reader get to know the theologians on their own terms. Of course, that will not be entirely possible—and there will be moments when I

³Ibid., 4–5.

will be unable to restrain myself from commenting—but that is the aim: not to predigest, pillage, or spin, but to introduce real people, which means people whose thoughts are so often a puzzling swirl of glories and gaffes.

Reading These Introductions

Each introduction will begin with a little biography and background—after all, no theology is written in a vacuum, and somehow, knowing about, say, Athanasius’s sense of humor and his “Boy’s Own” adventures makes Athanasius easier to get into. Then on to the theology, which will amount to a fast jog through each theologian’s major work(s). Note: this is rather different to my writing on “Calvin’s doctrine of election” or the like; instead, I will try to walk with readers through Calvin’s *Institutes*, getting to know its structure, feel, and argument. Readers interested in Calvin’s doctrine of election should then feel confident enough to put Reeves on one side and converse with Calvin directly. At the end of each introduction I will make some suggestions for getting to know that theologian better, and will provide a timeline to help give a snapshot-sense of the order and context of the life in question.

There is a story that emerges from these pages, and readers who work through one introduction after another should, by the end of the book, have glimpsed something of the overall movement and flow of Christian thought through the centuries. However, this is just as much a work to dip in and out of. Its purpose is not so much to tell a grand narrative as to meet and get to know some of the key characters. And those characters are remarkably diverse: some will sound more winning, more trustworthy, or more familiar; others may seem quite alien or off-putting. Thus if you find yourself floundering or overly enraged by one theologian, feel happy to move on to the next. He will, assuredly, be quite different.

But why these theologians, and not others? Quite simply, the goal of this work is to make accessible what otherwise seems intimidating, but if the very girth of the book were daunting, it would have failed in what it set out to do. I have therefore had to pick and choose theologians to introduce, and that means disappointing those whose heroes are not included. Still, I have not simply come up with a list of personal

favorites; I have minor disagreements with every theologian here, and major problems with a few. Nor is this my list of “great Christians.” Francis of Assisi, John Bunyan, and John Wesley will make no appearance, though undoubtedly they were great and influential; it is just that their greatness was not so much *as theologians*. Rather, I have tried to choose theologians who are influential or significant especially for the English-speaking world (many of whom, I suspect, are the very ones English-speaking people are most eager to know better). As a result, such mighty names as Origen, Palamas, Gerhard, Turretin, and Suárez (the list could go on) are not included. My apologies to any who miss them: accessibility calls.

The last word of introduction really belongs to C. S. Lewis, who grasped so well the point of wrestling with theology:

For my own part I tend to find the doctrinal books often more helpful in devotion than the devotional books, and I rather suspect that the same experience may await many others. I believe that many who find that “nothing happens” when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pipe in their teeth and a pencil in their hand.

May it be so for you now.

Only Let Me Reach Jesus Christ!

The Apostolic Fathers

By the end of the first century AD, Jesus's apostles were all dead and Jerusalem and its temple had been destroyed. It was a crucial time of transition for Christianity, made all the more difficult by the hostile notice the Roman Empire began to pay as it saw what looked to it like a subversive new sect in its midst.

The writings of the Apostolic Fathers are the most important books for understanding those first generations after the apostles: how they thought, lived, and died. The collection of the Apostolic Fathers consists of about ten authors who wrote from around the end of the first century to the middle of the second, put together by scholars and termed the Apostolic Fathers. However, as a group they are a real mixed bag: some are works by eminent figures of the time such as Polycarp of Smyrna; others are anonymous; they come from different genres (letters, works of apologetics, a sermon, an apocalypse, an account of a martyrdom, instructions on church order); and they represent a wide diversity of theologies. Perhaps the best way to understand them is to see them not as the best theology of the time but as representative best sellers of the generation after the apostles. As such they are not only significant but instructive.

We will examine each of the works normally included in the collection in order to see what they say and also to see what they tell us about earliest post-apostolic Christianity and its theology.

Papias

According to tradition, Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, was the disciple of the apostle John who actually wrote out John's Gospel as the apostle dictated it. He wrote a five-volume work of his own, *An Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*; however, today only fragments of his work survive. During the second century, Papias was widely held in high esteem; yet, largely because of his characteristically second-century belief in a literal, future millennium, he fell out of favor with subsequent generations who tended to understand the millennium more symbolically. The great third- to fourth-century church historian Eusebius dismissed Papias for this reason as "a man of exceedingly small intelligence."¹

Papias is valuable today for one reason in particular: he demonstrates for us the importance of oral tradition for early post-apostolic Christianity. It is clear from what survives of his work that an enormous number of oral traditions were in circulation concerning the life and sayings of Jesus and his apostles. It is also clear that such oral traditions were by no means distrusted as mere hearsay; instead, they were valued because they could be probed easily for veracity. For instance, Papias records that John and Philip went to evangelize Asia Minor, Philip settling with his family in Papias's own town of Hierapolis (where, according to tradition, Philip was martyred). John, he tells us, settled in Ephesus, was then exiled for a while to the island of Patmos, was recalled by the emperor Nerva (AD 96–98), then returned to Ephesus, there to be killed as the last of the apostles, in fulfillment of Mark 10:38–39. Mark, he tells us, wrote his Gospel based on Peter's testimony (Mark being Peter's disciple and companion in Rome [1 Pet. 5:13]). If true, it adds an exquisite poignancy to Mark's graphic account of Peter's betrayal of Jesus. Papias's most gruesomely fascinating account, though, is of Judas. Papias believed that the two New Testament accounts of Judas's end (Matt. 27:3–10; Acts 1:15–19) could be harmonized by under-

¹Eusebius, *Church History* 3.39; quoted from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, trans. P. Schaff and H. Wace, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986–1989).

standing that Judas did not die by hanging himself, but was cut down before he choked to death. Then he lived on, only to die when falling, so bloated that he burst open:

Judas was a terrible, walking example of ungodliness in this world, his flesh so bloated that he was not able to pass through a place where a wagon passes easily, not even his bloated head by itself. For his eyelids, they say, were so swollen that he could not see the light at all, and his eyes could not be seen, even by a doctor using an optical instrument, so far had they sunk below the outer surface. His genitals appeared more loathsome and larger than anyone else's, and when he relieved himself there passed through it pus and worms from every part of his body, much to his shame. After much agony and punishment, they say, he finally died in his own place, and because of the stench the area is deserted and uninhabitable even now; in fact, to this day one cannot pass that place without holding one's nose, so great was the discharge from his body, and so far did it spread over the ground.²

Clement of Rome

1 Clement

Perhaps the oldest complete work in the Apostolic Fathers, written around AD 95, is an anonymous letter traditionally attributed to Clement, Paul's coworker (Phil. 4:3) and the third bishop of Rome after Peter. It was written to the ever-problematic church of Corinth in order to address a number of issues that were causing disquiet there. One of those issues was still the resurrection of the body: the Corinthians clearly had not taken the message of 1 Corinthians 15 to heart! The main problem, however, was that the old concern of disunity had led to the church's elders being ousted and replaced in a church coup.

1 Clement argues that the takeover was entirely wrong, being motivated by pride and greed, and that the ousted elders must be restored. According to the letter, the move was a rebellion against God, who had appointed a proper ecclesiastical order: God commissioned Christ, who commissioned apostles, who commissioned bishops, who commission

²A fragment of Papias's *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*, cited by Apollinaris of Laodicea.

deacons.³ It is arguable whether or not this is a reference to the doctrine of apostolic succession as it would come to be formulated (after all, here the elders were said to have been appointed “with the consent of the whole church”⁴). What is clear, though, is that the role of the church elder has a significance in *1 Clement* that it does not have in 1 Corinthians: church unity now seems to be sought more in the elders than in the Spirit.

Advocates of episcopal church government argue that *1 Clement* is evidence of a very early and natural evolution of episcopalism. The fact that Clement was himself bishop of Rome is also used by advocates of papal supremacy to support their theory by suggesting that he wrote with authority to another church because of his position, even though there is no internal evidence in the letter to suggest this.

At the other end of the interpretative spectrum are those who see an almost complete discontinuity between a New Testament radical congregationalism and a monarchical episcopalism in the next generation. On this reading, earliest apostolic Christianity had no concept of eldership, churches being charismatic communities with no need for such leadership, meaning that the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) must be dismissed as later “deutero-Pauline” books because of their concern for church offices. Stimulating this kind of interpretation was a seminal work published in 1934 by Walter Bauer entitled *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*. Bauer’s claim was that an originally diverse Christianity soon began to be dominated by just one authoritarian group, found in Rome. The Roman church then rewrote history, setting its own beliefs as the standard of orthodoxy and labeling all dissent as heresy. Bauer’s thesis was seriously flawed (if power bought the title “orthodox,” how could those emperors who were Arian be dismissed as heretics?), yet it initiated what is today a prevalent trend for describing orthodoxy as mere authoritarianism.⁵

2 *Clement*

The second letter of Clement is misleadingly titled: it is not a letter, nor is it by Clement. It is a sermon, quite possibly preached by one of the

³Clement, *1 Clement* 42.

⁴Ibid., 44.3. All Apostolic Fathers quotations from here on are from Michael Holmes’s translation, *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006).

⁵Bart Ehrman is perhaps the foremost exponent of this view today.

Corinthian elders who were restored to their offices following Clement's "first" letter. The sermon has to do with a call to repentance, to think of Christ as God, and to believe in the resurrection. Its greatest value for us, though, is probably its treatment of Scripture: it contains the earliest example (outside the New Testament) of a passage from the New Testament being referred to as "Scripture" alongside the Old Testament.⁶ It reveals that there was a clear and early understanding of a New Testament canon of Scripture.

Ignatius of Antioch

One of the most remarkable and memorable figures of the first post-apostolic generation was Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in Syria. Strangely, we know almost nothing about him until he explodes onto the historical scene just a few weeks before his martyrdom in about AD 110. During a citywide persecution, he and some other Christians were arrested and sent to Rome to be thrown to wild beasts in the arena. En route, under armed guard, he dashed off seven letters to the churches in places he would pass through: the churches of Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Philadelphia, Smyrna (as well as one to Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna), and Rome. The letters really were dashed off (their style shows that they were written hastily and under considerable strain); nevertheless, they make for fascinating and illuminating reading. They are the last words of a man with only weeks to live, and yet, to quote Bruce Metzger, they are filled with "such strong faith and overwhelming love of Christ as to make them one of the finest literary expressions of Christianity during the second century."⁷

As he wrote, Ignatius had three main concerns on his mind. The first was that the churches be unified under their respective bishops. On this issue, Ignatius is so strongly episcopalian that he makes Clement appear positively congregationalist in contrast. For Ignatius, the church finds its unity through the bishop, and therefore he writes, "you must not do anything without the bishop and the presbyters"; indeed, it "is not permissible either to baptize or to hold a love feast without the

⁶ Clement, 2 *Clement* 2.4.

⁷ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 44.

bishop.”⁸ This is because, for Ignatius, the bishop represents Christ to the church, and thus to meet without the bishop would be to fail to be Christ’s church: “For everyone whom the Master of the house sends to manage his own house we must welcome as we would the one who sent him. It is obvious, therefore, that we must regard the bishop as the Lord himself.”⁹

The second concern on Ignatius’s mind was the problem of false teaching. In particular, Ignatius had two types of false teachers in mind: Docetists and Judaizers, both of whom denied in their own way that Christ had come in the flesh (cf. 1 John).

The Docetists maintained that Jesus was entirely divine, and that he only *appeared* to be human (the name “Docetic” comes from the Greek word *dokeō*, meaning “to seem” or “to appear”). Perhaps the most notorious Docetic teacher was Marcion, who taught that the good Savior-God of the New Testament is a different being than the bad Creator-God of the Old Testament. Jesus thus had nothing to do with the evil Creator-God’s physical world, and so could not actually have had a physical body, been born, have eaten, died, and so on. In stark opposition, Ignatius would boldly speak of “the blood of God,” for if the divine Christ had not truly assumed our humanity, then he could not have died for our sins.¹⁰ In fact, Ignatius’s entire motivation in accepting martyrdom was based on his belief in the real incarnation of Christ: Ignatius longed for martyrdom because then he would be copying Christ, but if Christ did not really suffer in his body, then Ignatius could not be copying him at all. “If that is the case, I die for no reason,” he wrote.¹¹ Instead, Ignatius wanted his life and death to proclaim that “There is only one physician, who is both flesh and spirit, born and unborn, God in man, true life in death, both from Mary and from God, first subject to suffering and then beyond it, Jesus Christ our Lord.”¹² It is hard to read such material and not be incredulous of the claim that Jesus’s full divinity and full humanity is a later, fourth-century invention.

The other type of false teacher Ignatius was eager to arm Christians

⁸ Ignatius, *Magnesian* 7.1; *Smyrnaeans* 8.2.

⁹ Ignatius, *Ephesians* 6.1; cf. *Trallians* 3.1; *Ephesians* 5.3; *Smyrnaeans* 6.2.

¹⁰ Ignatius, *Ephesians* 1.1; cf. *Romans* 6.3.

¹¹ Ignatius, *Trallians* 10.1; cf. *Smyrnaeans* 4.2.

¹² Ignatius, *Ephesians* 7.2.

against (particularly in Magnesia and Philadelphia) was the Judaizer, who taught that Christians must abide by Jewish customs, especially circumcision and the Mosaic law. For a time when Christianity was only just beginning to be recognized as something distinct from Judaism, this was a most pressing issue. Ignatius argued that the Judaizer's teaching misunderstood the very nature of the Old Testament: "if we continue to live in accordance with Judaism, we admit that we have not received grace. For the most godly prophets lived in accordance with Christ Jesus."¹³ The mistake of the Judaizers was to fail to see that Old Testament believers were themselves Christians, saved by nothing else than by trusting in Christ.¹⁴ The Jewish Scriptures existed to proclaim Christ and his gospel. As we will see, this was to be the issue of issues for many Christians of the day, who saw that the entire legitimacy of their faith depended on the Hebrew Scriptures being inherently Christian. If they were not, then Judaism, not Christianity, was true.

Ignatius's third concern as he wrote his letters was, understandably, his own death. This surfaces most clearly in his letter to the Romans. The point of his letter is to beg the Christians in Rome not to try to help him escape death when he arrives, for he is eager to be martyred:

I implore you: do not be unseasonably kind to me. Let me be food for the wild beasts. . . . Bear with me—I know what is best for me. Now at last I am beginning to be a disciple. May nothing visible or invisible envy me, so that I may reach Jesus Christ. Fire and cross and battles with wild beasts, mutilation, mangling, wrenching of bones, the hacking of limbs, the crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil—let these come upon me, only let me reach Jesus Christ!¹⁵

This enthusiasm of his is so inexplicable to many modern commentators that he is all too often written off as a psychotic. In point of fact, however, he is profoundly realistic, anticipating, for example, that his courage may well fail when the moment comes. Thus he writes, "if upon my arrival I myself should appeal to you, do not be persuaded

¹³ Ignatius, *Magnesians* 8.1–2; cf. 9.2.

¹⁴ Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 9.1.

¹⁵ Ignatius, *Romans* 4.1; 5.3.

by me.”¹⁶ Part of Ignatius’s reasoning was that Christians were normally released only upon denying Christ, and this would undoubtedly be what people would assume had happened if Ignatius were released, even if the Roman church really did manage to secure his freedom in another way. He would rather suffer death than that. Far more significantly, though, Ignatius believed that the best way for him to follow Christ was through the same kind of violent death Christ had suffered. In this way he would become most Christlike, and thus would most clearly confess the saving suffering of his God.¹⁷

Polycarp of Smyrna

Ignatius sent one of his letters to Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna and former disciple of the apostle John, who is probably the most renowned of all the Apostolic Fathers because of the martyrdom he also would suffer.

The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians

Polycarp himself wrote a letter to the church of Philippi a few weeks after Ignatius’s death in order to tackle some difficulties they were facing. The presenting issue was that one of their elders, Valens, had embezzled some of the church funds.¹⁸ However, there was also a problem of false teaching. When Paul wrote to the Philippians sixty or so years earlier, he had had to tackle some Judaizing false teachers (Phil. 3:2–3). By Polycarp’s time, the false teaching was more predominately Docetic.¹⁹ What is perhaps most interesting about Polycarp’s letter is the mildness of his rebuke to Valens in comparison with his treatment of the false teachers. Valens, who had been immoral, is called to repentance; the false teachers, on the other hand, are anathematized as “the firstborn of Satan.”²⁰ What appears to be going on is that Polycarp viewed theological belief as the impetus for behavior, and thus wrong belief would corrupt and splinter the church. The church in this time of harassment and persecution needed to stand fast in its doctrine in order to stand fast at all.

¹⁶Ibid., 7.2.

¹⁷Ibid., 6.3.

¹⁸Polycarp, *Philippians* 11.1.

¹⁹Ibid., 6.3–7.1.

²⁰Ibid., 11.4; 7.1.

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

The anonymous eyewitness account of the events leading up to, and including, Polycarp's execution fill out for us our understanding both of the post-apostolic church's theology of martyrdom and of why Christians of the time were persecuted.

The account describes Polycarp's martyrdom as the last in a local wave of persecution. Thus it begins with the trials and martyrdoms of other local Christians. Most are said to have been given extraordinary courage in their moment of need. However, one man, Quintus, rashly volunteered himself for martyrdom, only to apostatize when threatened. His behavior is included as a warning not to volunteer for martyrdom, however good it might be for those on whom it is thrust (like Ignatius).²¹

Polycarp is then sought out, and he neither seeks martyrdom nor shies away from it. From then on, numerous parallels between the last hours of Christ and Polycarp show Polycarp to be an exemplary follower of Christ. Like Ignatius, he is being a disciple in facing his martyrdom. The Roman officials try to persuade Polycarp to say "Caesar is Lord," to offer incense to Caesar, and to revile Christ. He continually refuses (at which time he utters the immortal words, "eighty-six years I have been his [Christ's] servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"²²), and eventually he is sentenced to be burned at the stake. The fire, however, fails to kill Polycarp, and thus he is stabbed to death.

We can learn a number of things from the account. We see that it was the mob, rather than the government, that instigated a local persecution of the Christians. This was certainly the normal pattern: there were instances when systematic persecution became Roman imperial policy,²³ but by and large persecution was popularly motivated, and thus sporadic and local. We also see that the reason Christians were persecuted was not per se because they were Christian but because they refused to worship the state gods, especially the emperor. To refuse to worship the emperor looked seditious to the Roman mind, for which religion was a highly

²¹ *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 9.3.

²³ This happened during the reigns of the emperors Nero (54–68), Trajan (98–117), Marcus Aurelius (161–180), Septimius Severus (193–211), Maximian (235), Decius and Valerian (249–260), and Diocletian and Galerian (303–313).

political concept; to fail to worship the other gods looked dangerously antisocial, for the gods, if not revered, could mete out all manner of punishments, from plague to crop failure. For the people, the persecution of such blasphemers was self-protection. It was for this reason that, a generation later, the great African theologian Tertullian wrote,

If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, “Away with the Christians to the lion!”²⁴

The Didache

The Didache (teaching) of the Apostles was a work known only by its title until its discovery, amid much media excitement, in a library in Constantinople in 1873. Its discovery caused such a stir because it is such an early (c. AD 100) and detailed discussion of life, practice, and beliefs in the early post-apostolic church.

It starts with a section of ethical teaching, explaining that there are two paths for us, the path of life (an extremely strict code of morality) and the path of death (failure to adhere to that code). What is both striking and disturbing is that there is nothing explicitly Christian in that entire section of ethical instruction. Justification and the gospel of grace are poignantly absent, leaving the impression of a life that knows far more of legalism than freedom. Ironically, it feels a very far cry from the actual teaching of the apostles as we have it in the New Testament. Instead, being so early an exhibit of Christian legalism, it serves as a powerful affirmation of the apostle Paul’s point, that people can turn with astonishing speed from the grace of Christ to another gospel (Gal. 1:6).

The next section of the *Didache* gives instructions on how to practice baptism, prayer, fasting, and the Eucharist, before moving on to deal with what was evidently a growing problem: what to do with itinerant “apostles and prophets.” Apparently, two types of Christian leader had developed by this time: itinerant prophets who followed the apostle Paul’s model of ministry, and local church elders who were

²⁴Tertullian, *Apology* 40.

permanent members of one church. The problem, however, was that, unlike Paul, some of these itinerant prophets had begun to be a burden to local churches by living off of them. While respecting the office of the itinerant prophet as of equal value to that of the elder, *The Didache* responds with strict instructions on how to sort out the rogues: if, for example, they stay for more than two days, order meals “in the spirit,” or ask for money, they are to be rejected as false prophets.²⁵

The work closes with a brief apocalyptic section, which is just one of many reminders in the Apostolic Fathers that the future return of Christ was a prominent feature in the minds of that generation of Christians. It forcefully molded not only how they died but also how they lived.

The Shepherd of Hermas

The most popular and influential of the Apostolic Fathers in its day was the lengthy quasi-apocalyptic book *The Shepherd of Hermas*. In it the author (Hermas) records in floridly religious tones a number of visions he has received concerning the nature and state of the church in his day. For the first half of the book, these visions are interpreted to him by a female figure who represents the church. In the second half of the book it is Hermas’s guardian angel who interprets the visions to him while taking the form of a shepherd (hence the title of the book).

Hermas begins the work by writing of a time when he had lusted after a woman he once saw bathing in the river Tiber. His first vision then commences, in which he sees the woman accusing him from heaven. At first, surprisingly, he is surprised, and responds, “I sinned against you? In what way? Or when have I ever spoken an indecent word to you? Have I not always regarded you as a goddess?” (not the best defense, one might have thought, though he certainly had thought about her like this when he saw her naked in the river).²⁶ Yet she convinces him that his lust was sin, leaving him to wonder, “If even this sin is recorded against me, how can I be saved? Or how will I propitiate God for my conscious sins?”²⁷ This sets the scene for the rest of the book, which is chiefly concerned with the possibility of forgiveness.

²⁵*Didache* 11.5–6.

²⁶*Hermas* 1.7.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 2.1.

Four more visions follow, the most important of which concerns a tower built on water.²⁸ This represents the church built on baptism and reveals what a high view of baptism had started to emerge in certain Christian circles. It begins to clarify a main concern of the book, and what was clearly a popular concern of the day: is there a possibility of forgiveness after the washing of baptism? The answer given is yes, but only one possibility, for “there is only one repentance for God’s servants.”²⁹ It was this graceless belief that fueled the practice of postponing baptism until near death. The sorts of things Hermas sees in the vision are angelic builders removing stones from the tower, indicating the removal of believers for sin, and round stones that do not fit, representing rich believers, who must first have their riches chopped away before they can fit into the tower.³⁰

Next come twelve “commandments,” all largely pragmatic and moral. The sixth contains the crudest statement of salvation by works prior to the arch-heretic Pelagius:

“Now hear,” he said, “about faith. There are two angels with a person, one of righteousness and one of wickedness. . . . This commandment explains the things about faith, in order that you may trust the works of the angel of righteousness, and that doing them, you may live to God. But believe that the works of the angel of wickedness are dangerous, so that by not doing them you will live to God.”³¹

Surely, however, the oddest commandment is the tenth:

Clothe yourself, therefore, with cheerfulness, which always finds favor with God and is acceptable to him, and rejoice in it. For all cheerful people do good things and think good things, and despise grief. But sorrowful people always do evil.³²

One wonders how the apostle Paul would have reacted (cf. Rom. 9:2), for this is nothing like his liberating theology of joy.

²⁸Ibid., 9–21.

²⁹Ibid., 29.8; 31.1–7.

³⁰Ibid., 13.5; 14.5–7.

³¹Ibid., 36.1, 10.

³²Ibid., 42.1–2.

The book ends with ten “parables,” or lessons to be learned from trees, vines, stones, and so on. These too contain “wisdom” that seems almost entirely ignorant of salvation not by merit but by grace:

Keep the Lord’s commandments, and you will be pleasing to him and will be enrolled among the number of those who keep his commandments. But if you do anything good beyond God’s commandment, you will gain greater glory for yourself, and will be more honored in God’s sight than you otherwise would have been.³³

The idea that we can do good works above and beyond what God commands (“works of supererogation”) was wholly rejected by Protestants at the time of the Reformation as an arrogant undermining of both man’s sinful inability before God, and God’s grace.³⁴ Yet it fits Hermas’s understanding that the gospel is a new law from God.³⁵ On this understanding, it is no wonder that mere faith is insufficient to be justified before God. In this way *The Shepherd of Hermas* is the most stark indication of a popular turn in the early second century from the gospel of grace to a harsh legalism.

Letter to Diognetus

The final two Apostolic Fathers are essentially works of apologetics. They are the *Letter of Barnabas*, a work that seeks to defend Christianity in the face of Judaism, and the *Letter to Diognetus*, a piece that defends Christianity in the face of paganism.

Apologetics became a popular form of literature among Christians in the second century, both because of the desire to promote Christianity and because of the need to defend it from often-violent attack. Other examples of apologetic works include the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix and the works of Justin Martyr. In the *Octavius* we learn that Christians were accused by society at large of gross sexual immorality, incest, cannibalism, and murder. Minucius Felix explains that these charges

³³ *Ibid.*, 56.2–3.

³⁴ Article 14 of the Church of England’s Thirty-Nine Articles, for example, reads, “Voluntary Works besides, over and above, God’s Commandments, which they call Works of Supererogation, cannot be taught without arrogancy and impiety: for by them men do declare, that they do not only render unto God as much as they are bound to do, but that they do more for his sake, than of bounden duty is required: whereas Christ saith plainly, When ye have done all that are commanded to you, say, We are unprofitable servants.”

³⁵ *Hermas* 69.2.

arose out of complete misunderstandings of the facts that Christians were compelled to meet secretly, where they would greet each other as brothers and sisters with the kiss of peace (whence the charges of incest), there to symbolically eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of God (whence the charges of cannibalism).

The *Letter to Diognetus* is a work nobody seemed to know of until a manuscript was discovered in 1436, being used to wrap fish in a fishmonger's shop in Constantinople!³⁶ It is an anonymous work, though it is possible that it could be either the lost apology of Quadratus spoken of by Eusebius,³⁷ or by Polycarp. It is addressed to a “most excellent Diognetus,” who could well be the Diognetus who was a tutor to the emperor Marcus Aurelius, making it most likely that the work was intended as an open letter for public consumption by a pagan audience.

Apparently, Diognetus had expressed interest in why Christians worshiped neither the gods of the pagans nor in the same way as the Jews. The author replies with an attack on idolatry that is reminiscent of Isaiah 44: the gods of wood and stone are deaf, dumb, and blind. “These are the things you call gods; you serve them, you worship them, and in the end you become like them.”³⁸ It is a mocking but deftly made theological point: we become like the gods we serve.

The Jews, he goes on to argue, are equally mistaken in their understanding of God, for, as pagans make offerings to gods unable to receive them, so Jews make offerings to God when in fact he has no need of them.³⁹ This argument fits well into an understanding of the gospel that is refreshingly opposed to the legalism of *The Didache* and *The Shepherd of Hermas*; in fact, reading the *Letter to Diognetus* is like reading Luther by comparison. For example, the author of *Diognetus* writes of God that

when our unrighteousness was fulfilled, and it had been made perfectly clear that its wages—punishment and death—were to be expected. . . . he himself gave up his own Son as a ransom for us, the holy one for

³⁶The manuscript fared little better later on; having been transcribed, it was destroyed when the library of Strasbourg, where it had been deposited, was bombed in 1870.

³⁷A fragment from the apology of Quadratus, preserved for us by Eusebius (*Church History* 4.3.1–2), is sometimes included in the collection of the Apostolic Fathers. Some scholars believe that the fragment should be fitted into a gap that exists in the text of the *Letter to Diognetus*.

³⁸*Letter to Diognetus* 2.5.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 3.5.

the lawless, the guiltless for the guilty, the just for the unjust, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else but his righteousness could have covered our sins? In whom was it possible for us, the lawless and ungodly, to be justified, except in the Son of God alone? O the sweet exchange, O the incomprehensible work of God, O the unexpected blessings, that the sinfulness of many should be hidden in one righteous person, while the righteousness of one should justify many sinners!⁴⁰

His argument continues with a defense of the innocence of Christians. Yet, he maintains, “what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world”—that is, as the soul is in the body but not of it, so Christians are in the world, and so, like souls, are despised. And, just as the soul is improved by fasting, so Christians increase when persecuted.⁴¹

Finally, amid an explanation of how God has shown his love to us sinners in sending Christ for our salvation, the author urges Diognetus to acquire the joyous knowledge of God for himself: “Then you will admire those who for righteousness’ sake endure the transitory fire, and you will consider them blessed, when you comprehend that other fire . . .”⁴² Again the author makes it clear that the coming judgment was a prime consolation for the persecuted Christians of the time.

Letter of Barnabas

The last of the Apostolic Fathers is an anonymous letter, allegedly written by the apostle Paul’s companion Barnabas. It is often interpreted as an argument that the Christian church has superseded and replaced the Jewish nation as God’s true people. However, it is in fact an argument that, from the very beginning, the faithful always were Christian, even though the majority of the nation of Israel failed to understand their own Scriptures’ proclamation of Christ.

Like Ignatius, Barnabas held that the Old Testament was originally intended as a Christian book. Both saw that, unless the original authors of the Scriptures had intended to teach the Christian gospel, then Christians could validly be accused by Jews of reading an alien meaning

⁴⁰Ibid., 9.2–5.

⁴¹Ibid., 6.

⁴²Ibid., 10.8.

back into those Scriptures. Yet, if a Christological understanding of the Old Testament were possible only with hindsight, Christianity could be neither authentic nor credible. In order to be able to face Judaism and Marcion alike, Barnabas argued that a true understanding of Moses should lead to faith in Christ.⁴³ Thus he writes, “Abraham, who first instituted circumcision, looked forward in the spirit to Jesus when he circumcised”;⁴⁴ Moses, both by stretching out his hands on the hill in Exodus 17, and by lifting up the serpent on the pole in Numbers 21, deliberately showed the people “a symbol of Jesus.”⁴⁵ “Again, what does Moses say to ‘Jesus’ the son of Nun when he gave him this name, since he was a prophet, for the sole purpose that all the people might hear that the Father was revealing everything about his Son Jesus?”⁴⁶ Barnabas’s intention is to demonstrate that Moses and the prophets were deliberate in prophesying Jesus’s work. For this reason he does not appeal to the New Testament to support his argument (in any case, he could not, given that the New Testament was not yet a fixed canon), but seeks instead to interpret the Old Testament on its own terms so that his reading can be seen to represent the inherent meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures.

After looking at aspects of the sacrificial system, the events of the exodus, and so on, Barnabas comes to consider Solomon’s temple, and his treatment of it illustrates his entire approach. He argues that the temple in Jerusalem was an earthly copy that existed to proclaim a spiritual reality. The mistake of the Jews who set their hope on the building was to set their gaze on the copy, when they should have learned about the spiritual reality from it.⁴⁷ So it was with circumcision and the entire law: the Jewish mistake was to confuse the earthly signs with the spiritual realities they represented. In looking only to the earthly, they found themselves enslaved to the ruler of this age and his angels.⁴⁸ And thus, by failing to be led to Christ by their own Scriptures, Barnabas maintains that Jews had come to worship a quite different god.

⁴³ For a helpful discussion of how this principle functioned in the wider church at the time, see Gerald Bray, *Creeds, Councils, and Christ*, 2nd ed. (Fearn: Mentor, 1997), 49–54.

⁴⁴ *Letter of Barnabas* 9.7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.5–6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.1–2; 9.4.

Barnabas's letter may not appear to cover material as urgently significant for the time as, say, a theology of martyrdom; however, what he makes clear is that the battle for Christianity's survival in the hostile second century was as much as anything else the battle for ownership of the Scriptures.

Going On with the Apostolic Fathers

In order to read the Apostolic Fathers themselves, the best place to start is probably with Michael Holmes's excellent modern translation, *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006). Holmes also provides brief introductions to each work. After that, Clayton Jefford has provided the two most useful introductions: a shorter one, *The Apostolic Fathers: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006); and a slightly longer one, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996).

Apostolic Fathers Timeline

- 60–135? Papias
 - 64 Great Fire of Rome
 - 64–68 Nero's punishment of the Christians
 - 70 Destruction of the temple in Jerusalem
- 70–135 *Letter of Barnabas*
 - 95? *1 Clement*
 - 96? *2 Clement*
 - 100? *The Didache*
- 100–165 Justin Martyr
 - 110? Martyrdom of Ignatius
- 110–140? *The Shepherd of Hermas*
- 130–200 Irenaeus of Lyons
 - 150–190 *Letter to Diognetus*
 - 155? Martyrdom of Polycarp
- 160–225 Tertullian
- 303–312 The "Great Persecution"
 - 312 Conversion of the emperor Constantine to Christianity
 - 325 Council of Nicea

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