CHURCH HISTORY SERIES • LESSON 4

The Apostolic Fathers

The generation that knew the Apostles — how the church sounded between the last Apostle and the first ecumenical council • c. AD 95–150

By Shane Gunn • Primary-source study

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Where this fits: Lesson 4 in the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series — the supplementary bridge between **Lesson 3 (Fall of Jerusalem, AD 70)** and the Nicaea lesson still to come. These are the writings that tell us how the church actually prayed, gathered, suffered, and taught in the generation right after **the Apostles**. See the full **Series Timeline** for how this slots into the whole story.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

The New Testament ends in the late first century. The first ecumenical council meets at Nicaea in 325. Between those two fixed points lies a stretch of roughly two centuries in which almost nothing "famous" happens — no empire-wide decree, no ecumenical creed, no settled canon. And yet this is the period in which the church *becomes* the church we recognize: it organizes itself around bishops, presbyters, and deacons; it gathers on Sunday around bread and wine; it writes its first manuals and its first apologies; and it dies in fire for the name of Jesus.

The writings we call *the Apostolic Fathers* are our earliest window into that world. They are **not** Scripture. But they were written by men who had shaken the hands of the Apostles — Polycarp knew John; Clement knew Peter and Paul; Papias collected oral tradition directly from

eyewitnesses. If you want to know how the Apostles' own students spoke, prayed, baptized, organized, and died, you read these pages.

> *Greek NT (2 Tim 2:2): και ̀ ἃ ἤκουσας παρ' ἐμοῦ δια ̀ πολλῶν μαρτύρων, ταῦτα παράθου πιστοῖς ἀνθρώποις, οἵτινες ἱκανοι ̀ ἔσονται και ̀ ἑτέρους διδάξαι.*
>
> 2 Timothy 2:2 (ESV): "What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also."

The Apostolic Fathers are Paul's instruction *in action*. They are the first generation of "faithful men" the apostle Paul had in view.

PART 1 — WHAT IS AN "APOSTOLIC FATHER"?

The phrase *Apostolic Fathers* was coined in the 17th century (first by William Wake in 1693) to describe a specific cluster of early Christian writings: those produced by authors believed to have had personal contact with the Apostles, together with a small number of anonymous works from the same generation. The modern standard collection (Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 3rd ed., 2007) contains ten documents:

1. *1 Clement* — Clement of Rome to the Corinthians (c. AD 96)
2. *2 Clement* — an anonymous early sermon (c. 120–140)
3. The *Seven Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (c. 107–117)
4. *Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians* (c. 110–135)
5. *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* (c. 155–160)
6. *The Didache*, or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (c. 50–100)
7. *The Epistle of Barnabas* (c. 100–130)
8. *The Shepherd of Hermas* (c. 100–150)
9. The *Fragments of Papias* (c. 110)
10. *The Epistle to Diognetus* (c. 150)

None of these is in the New Testament. Several were seriously considered in antiquity (the Shepherd of Hermas is included in *Codex Sinaiticus*, one of our oldest complete Bibles). But the

church eventually recognized them as *edifying* rather than *canonical*. Knowing where the line fell and why helps us understand what the canon actually is. (See **Lesson 1, Part 6**.)

PART 2 — CLEMENT OF ROME (C. AD 96)

Clement of Rome

BISHOP OF ROME • DISCIPLE OF PETER AND PAUL • 1 CLEMENT • C. AD 96

Roman church **Order** **Earliest**

Clement was the third or fourth bishop of Rome after Peter (the succession lists vary). Irenaeus, a century later, calls him "Clement who had seen the blessed Apostles, and had conversed with them." His one surviving letter, written from the church in Rome to the church in Corinth around AD 96, is the earliest Christian writing outside the New Testament we still possess. It addresses a real crisis: younger men in Corinth had deposed their duly appointed presbyters.

Clement's argument is striking. He grounds the authority of Christian ministry in an unbroken chain: God → Christ → Apostles → appointed leaders.

> *"The Apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent from God. Christ therefore is from God, and the Apostles from Christ… They went forth with the Holy Spirit's full assurance, preaching the good news that the kingdom of God was about to come. They appointed their first-fruits, testing them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who would later believe."*
>
> **— 1 Clement 42.1–4**

This is the earliest explicit statement of what later theology will call *apostolic succession*. Notice what it is and is not: Clement does not claim the Bishop of Rome rules the other churches. He claims that the ministry of the church is not invented but *received*.

> *"Let us fix our gaze on the blood of Christ, and realize how precious it is to his Father; because being poured out for our salvation it obtained the grace of repentance for all the world."*
>
> **— 1 Clement 7.4**

Whole chapters of 1 Clement read like paraphrases of the New Testament. Ch. 49's hymn to love reads as a straight commentary on 1 Corinthians 13; chs. 44–47 repeatedly quote Paul by name. The Corinthians were still reading Paul's letters forty years after they received them — and Rome knew it.

PART 3 — IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH (C. AD 107–117)

Ignatius of Antioch

BISHOP OF ANTIOCH • MARTYR UNDER TRAJAN • SEVEN LETTERS WRITTEN EN ROUTE TO ROME

Martyr | Catholic Church | Anti-Docetic | Bishops

Ignatius was bishop of Antioch — the same city where disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). Arrested during the reign of Trajan, he was sent under armed guard to Rome to be executed in the arena. On the journey he wrote seven letters: to the churches at Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Philadelphia, and Smyrna, a personal letter to Polycarp, and a remarkable letter to the Christians at Rome *begging them not to save him*.

> *Greek: σῖτός εἰμι θεοῦ, καὶ διὰ ὀδόντων θηρίων ἀλήθομαι, ἵνα καθαρὸς ἄρτος εὑρεθῶ Χριστοῦ.*
>
> "I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts, that I may be found pure bread of Christ." — **Ignatius, *Romans* 4.1**

Ignatius contributes three things to early Christian thought that will shape the centuries after him:

> • **The first written use of "catholic church."** Writing to the church at Smyrna:

> *Greek: ὅπου ἂν φανῇ ὁ ἐπίσκοπος, ἐκεῖ το ` πλῆθος ἔστω, ὥσπερ ὅπου ἂν ᾖ Χριστο `ς Ἰησοῦς, ἐκεῖ ἡ καθολικη ` ἐκκλησία.*
>
> "Wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic (καθολικη `, *katholikê*) church." — **Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans* 8.2**

"Catholic" here means *universal* — the whole church across geography and time — not yet a denominational label.

> • **The monarchical episcopate.** Ignatius is the first Christian author to consistently describe church order as a single bishop with a college of presbyters (elders) and a corps of deacons. He urges the churches to "do nothing without the bishop" (*Trall.* 2.2). This structure, already present in embryo in the Pastoral Epistles, becomes universal in the second century largely on the strength of Ignatius' letters.

> • **Anti-docetism.** A heresy called *docetism* (from Greek *dokein*, "to seem") taught that Jesus only *appeared* to have a human body — because the divine could not really suffer or die. Ignatius demolishes the teaching:

> *"He was truly of the family of David according to the flesh, Son of God by the will and power of God, truly born of a virgin, truly nailed for us in the flesh under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch… he truly suffered, as also he truly raised himself."*
>
> **— Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans* 1.1–2**

The word *truly* (ἀληθῶς) recurs like a drumbeat. Ignatius is dying for a real Jesus — and he refuses to die for a fiction.

PART 4 — POLYCARP OF SMYRNA (C. AD 69–155)

Polycarp of Smyrna

BISHOP OF SMYRNA • DISCIPLE OF THE APOSTLE JOHN • TEACHER OF IRENAEUS • MARTYRED C. AD 155

Disciple of John **Martyr** **Bridge generation**

Polycarp is arguably the most historically significant figure in this lesson. Irenaeus of Lyon, who had sat at Polycarp's feet as a boy, tells us plainly that Polycarp had personally known the Apostle John and others who had seen the Lord. When Polycarp speaks, we are hearing the second-century echo of John the son of Zebedee.

> *"I can even describe the place where the blessed Polycarp used to sit and discourse — his goings out, too, and his comings in — his general mode of life and personal appearance… and how he would speak of his familiar conversation with John, and with the rest of those who had seen the Lord; and how he would relate their words."*
>
> **— Irenaeus, letter to Florinus (preserved in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.20.5–7)**

Polycarp's one surviving letter is to the church at Philippi (c. 110–135). It is, essentially, a mosaic of New Testament quotations. Polycarp has clearly been reading Paul's letters, 1 Peter, 1 John, and the Pastorals as authoritative Scripture.

His martyrdom (c. 155) is described in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the earliest detailed account of a Christian martyrdom we have. The Roman proconsul, trying to save the old man's life, urges him to swear by the genius of Caesar and reject Christ:

> *"Eighty and six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"*
>
> **— *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9.3**

He was burned at the stake. The account records that the fire formed an arch around his body without consuming him, so he was finally pierced with a dagger. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* became the template for every martyrdom account that followed; its vocabulary of *imitatio Christi* — the martyr as a witness who imitates Christ's passion — shaped the martyrology of the church for the next three centuries.

PART 5 — THE DIDACHE (C. AD 50–120)

The Didache / Teaching of the Twelve Apostles

ANONYMOUS CHURCH MANUAL • LIKELY SYRIAN/PALESTINIAN • POSSIBLY THE EARLIEST NON-CANONICAL CHRISTIAN DOCUMENT

Church manual | Liturgy | Baptism | Eucharist

For fifteen centuries the *Didache* was known only by name; fathers cited it but no copy survived. Then in 1873 the Greek Orthodox metropolitan **Philotheos Bryennios** found an eleventh-century manuscript of it in a library at Constantinople. Its publication in 1883 reshaped early-church studies overnight.

The *Didache* is a practical manual for starting a church. It is tiny — about 2,500 Greek words, sixteen short chapters — but it tells us how the earliest Christians actually did what they did.

> *Greek: ὁδοι ̀ δύο εἰσί, μία τῆς ζωῆς και ̀ μία τοῦ θανάτου, διαφορα ̀ δε ̀ πολλη ̀ μεταξυ ̀ τῶν δύο ὁδῶν.*
>
> "There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways." — **Didache 1.1**

> • **On baptism (ch. 7):** "Baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in running water. But if you do not have running water, baptize in other water; and if you cannot in cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, pour water three times on the head in the name of the Father and Son and Holy

Spirit." Baptism is by immersion where possible, triune, and preceded by a period of fasting and instruction.

• **On the Eucharist (chs. 9–10):** we have the earliest surviving Christian eucharistic prayers. "We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David your child, which you made known to us through Jesus your child… As this broken bread was scattered on the mountains and gathered to become one, so let your church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your kingdom." (9.2–4)

• **On Sunday worship (ch. 14):** "On the Lord's own day, gather yourselves together and break bread and give thanks, after confessing your transgressions, so that your sacrifice may be pure."

• **On itinerant prophets (ch. 11):** welcome a real prophet, but "if the one who comes is a mere passer-by, help him as much as you can; but he shall not stay with you more than two or three days. If he asks for money, he is a false prophet."

The *Didache* reads like a church-planting handbook — practical, earthy, worried about charlatans, centered on the real Presence of Christ at the table. It is remarkable how much of the *Didache*'s pattern the church has been living ever since.

PART 6 — FOUR MORE VOICES

The Shepherd of Hermas (c. AD 100–150)

ANONYMOUS APOCALYPTIC WORK • WRITTEN AT ROME • ONCE TREATED AS SCRIPTURE IN SOME CHURCHES

Apocalyptic | Repentance | Near-canonical

The *Shepherd of Hermas* is a long sequence of visions, mandates, and allegorical "similitudes" given to a former slave named Hermas at Rome. Its main theological concern is whether post-baptismal sins can be forgiven at all — a live question in the second century, when baptism was often delayed until late in life for this very reason. *Hermas* answers *yes, once more*. It was popular enough that the fourth-century *Codex Sinaiticus* includes it at the end of the New Testament. The church ultimately recognized it as valuable but not Scripture.

The Epistle of Barnabas (c. AD 100–130)

ANONYMOUS LETTER • PROBABLY FROM ALEXANDRIA • TRADITIONALLY ATTRIBUTED (WRONGLY) TO PAUL'S COMPANION BARNABAS

Allegorical | Alexandrian | OT & Christ

The *Epistle of Barnabas* reads the Old Testament through an aggressively allegorical and Christological lens. Its treatment of Judaism is harsh by our standards and reflects the sharpening of the Jewish-Christian boundary after **AD 70**. It is important historically as evidence of how some early Christians read the Hebrew Scriptures, and as a window into the Alexandrian allegorical tradition that will flower in Origen.

2 Clement (c. AD 120–140)

ANONYMOUS EARLY SERMON • NOT ACTUALLY BY CLEMENT OF ROME • OLDEST SURVIVING CHRISTIAN SERMON OUTSIDE THE NT

Homily | Pastoral

Despite its traditional name, *2 Clement* is neither by Clement nor a letter; it is an early sermon, preserved because it was bound with *1 Clement* in early manuscripts. Its opening line — "Brothers, we must think of Jesus Christ as we do of God" — is one of the clearest second-century statements of Christ's divinity we possess.

Papias of Hierapolis (c. AD 60–130)

BISHOP OF HIERAPOLIS (PHRYGIA) • HEARER OF JOHN • WROTE FIVE BOOKS OF *EXPOSITIONS OF THE SAYINGS OF THE LORD*; ONLY FRAGMENTS SURVIVE

Oral tradition | Gospel origins

Papias deliberately preferred oral testimony from people who had heard the Apostles to any written source he had. “If ever anyone came who had been a follower of the elders, I would inquire about the words of the elders — what Andrew or Peter had said, or Philip, or Thomas, or James, or John, or Matthew… For I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as information from a living and abiding voice.” (preserved in Eusebius, HE 3.39.4)

Eusebius also preserves Papias’ testimony about the origins of the first two Gospels:

> *“Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatever he remembered, though not in order, of the things either said or done by the Lord… Matthew composed the logia [sayings] in the Hebrew dialect, and each one translated them as he was able.”*
>
> **— Papias, via Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15–16**

PART 7 — THE EPISTLE TO DIOGNETUS (C. AD 150)

The Epistle to Diognetus

ANONYMOUS APOLOGETIC LETTER • ADDRESSED TO A PAGAN INQUIRER • DISCOVERED ONLY IN 1436

Apology | Pagan inquirer | Stranger/citizen

This anonymous letter answers a pagan named Diognetus who has asked, in effect, “Who are these Christians?” Its fifth chapter, describing Christians in the Roman world, is one of the most beautiful paragraphs of early Christian literature — and still one of the most useful descriptions of what a disciple looks like.

> *“Christians are distinguished from the rest of humanity neither by country nor language nor customs. For they do not live in cities of their own, or speak some*

> *unusual dialect, or practice a peculiar way of life… They live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens. They take part in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and every fatherland is a foreign land… They love everyone, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown, yet they are condemned. They are put to death, yet they are brought to life. They are poor, yet they make many rich. They lack everything, yet they abound in everything… In a word, what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world."*
>
> **— *Epistle to Diognetus* 5.1–6.1 (c. AD 150)**

Every generation of the church that has lost its way has found its way home partly by rereading this letter.

PART 8 — WHAT THESE WRITINGS TELL US

Put the ten Apostolic Fathers documents together and a consistent picture of early second-century Christianity emerges:

> **1. The church is already gathering on Sunday around bread and wine.** The Lord's Day assembly with Eucharist and confession is not a medieval invention (*Didache* 14; Ignatius, *Magn.* 9).

> **2. Threefold ministry — bishop, presbyters, deacons — is becoming normal.** Clement argues for it by apostolic succession; Ignatius assumes it as self-evident; the *Didache* describes a pre-monarchical stage in which prophets and teachers still function alongside the local presbytery.

> **3. Baptism is triune, preferably by immersion in running water, preceded by catechesis and fasting.** The language of Matthew 28:19 is already the universal formula.

4. The New Testament is being read as Scripture. Polycarp, Clement, and Ignatius quote from what would later be canonical books as authoritative. The canon is not yet formally listed, but the instinct of canon — *these books are apostolic* — is already in operation. (See **Lesson 1, Part 6**.)

5. Christology is high from the beginning. Ignatius calls Jesus "our God" repeatedly. *2 Clement* opens by insisting that Christians must think of Jesus "as we do of God." The Trinitarian controversies of the fourth century will debate the *how*, but they do not invent the *that*.

6. Martyrdom is already a pattern of discipleship. Ignatius goes willingly to the lions; Polycarp welcomes the fire. The church believes that to die for the name of Jesus is to be joined to his own passion.

7. Heresy is a real and present threat. Docetism (Ignatius), Judaizing (Ignatius, Barnabas), moral laxity (Hermas), false prophets (*Didache*), and false apostles are all already at work. Christian theology is forged in response.

8. Apostolic succession is about preserving the deposit, not inventing new authority. Clement's appeal is conservative: the presbyters in Corinth should not be deposed *because* the Apostles appointed the pattern — not *because* Rome rules Corinth. The contrast with the developed medieval papacy is instructive.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR US

Three disciplines come out of reading these writings together:

• **Our faith is older than our denomination.** Whatever label is on our sign — Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, non-denominational — the *shape* of our gathered life (Sunday worship, reading Scripture, bread and wine, baptism in the triune name, bishop-

presbyter-deacon offices in embryo) was already in place within fifteen years of John's death. We did not invent it; we received it.

• **Martyrdom is not a special vocation for religious athletes.** Ignatius and Polycarp both regarded their deaths as the *natural* climax of their baptism. Every Christian who has been baptized has already enacted a kind of death (Rom 6:3–4); the martyr simply finishes what baptism began. Watching a people who bleed without flinching reshapes how we read 2 Timothy 3:12 ("all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted").

• **The gospel is handed on, not discovered.** Every Apostolic Father writes as a custodian, not an originator. Clement appeals to what the Apostles gave; Ignatius dies for what he received; Polycarp repeats it word for word; the *Didache* opens with the phrase already in use for half a century. The Christian life is not a solo expedition of religious self-discovery. It is joining an unbroken queue of hands passing a lit candle in the dark.

Greek NT (Jude 3): ἀγαπητοί, πᾶσαν σπουδη ̀ν ποιούμενος γράφειν ὑμῖν περι ̀ τῆς κοινῆς ἡμῶν σωτηρίας… παρακαλῶν ἐπαγωνίζεσθαι τῇ ἅπαξ παραδοθείσῃ τοῖς ἁγίοις πίστει.

Jude 3 (ESV): "Beloved… I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If Polycarp personally knew the Apostle John, then the church in 155 was in literal living memory of Jesus. How does that shorten or sharpen your sense of our distance from the New Testament?

2. Ignatius' line — "wherever the bishop is, there is the congregation" — is loved by some Christians and resisted by others. What questions does it raise for how our own church identifies its leadership?

3. The *Didache* prefers immersion but permits pouring if running water is not available. What does that practical flexibility teach us about mode versus meaning in the sacraments?

4. The *Shepherd of Hermas* was once read as Scripture and eventually was not. What does its omission from the canon (alongside the inclusion of, say, Philemon) tell you about how the church decided what Scripture is?

5. The *Epistle to Diognetus* describes Christians as "resident aliens" in every earthly country. In what specific ways should our congregation look a bit "foreign" to our neighbours — and where have we perhaps become too comfortably native?

6. Ignatius walked toward the lions; Polycarp walked toward the fire. What would it mean to live your week this week as if you were already halfway to Rome?

CLOSING PRAYER

Father of the Apostles and of their children, we thank you for Clement of Rome, for Ignatius of Antioch, for Polycarp of Smyrna, and for the nameless ones whose letters we still read — the Didachist, the preacher of 2 Clement, the writer to Diognetus. We thank you that every one of them received and handed on; not one of them invented. Teach us to live as they lived, in the truth they received. Give us Ignatius' steel, Polycarp's patience, Clement's love of order, the Didachist's plain practicality, and the heart of Diognetus' letter — a people who are in the world but not of it, loved by you, hated

> sometimes, faithful always. Through Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today and forever. Amen.

FURTHER READING

Primary sources (all public domain; modern editions linked to translators):

- *1 Clement* (c. AD 96) — full text; 47 short chapters.
- The *Seven Letters of Ignatius* — the "middle recension" is the critical-text standard today.
- *Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians* and *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*.
- *The Didache* — 16 chapters, rediscovered in 1873.
- *The Shepherd of Hermas* — Visions, Mandates, Similitudes.
- *The Epistle of Barnabas*; *2 Clement*; *The Fragments of Papias* (preserved in Eusebius, *EH* 3.39).
- *The Epistle to Diognetus* — the jewel of the collection.

Modern editions and studies:

- Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (3rd ed., Baker Academic, 2007) — the standard critical edition used throughout this lesson.
- Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library 24–25 (2003).
- Clayton N. Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: A Student's Introduction* (2nd ed., 2012).
- Paul Foster (ed.), *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers* (T&T Clark, 2007).
- Thomas O'Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians* (2011).

- Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points* (3rd ed., 2012) — ch. 2 treats this era as the run-up to Nicaea.

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