

# THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

EARLY CHURCH HISTORY – FALL 2023

## WHO WERE THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS?

- They were the first generation of Christian leaders after the death of the Apostles.
- By the early 2nd century, the term bishop was being used separately from presbyter (elder).
- Didache - "teaching of the twelve apostles"
  - The most important document from this time period
  - It instructed believers in the basics of the faith and prepared them for baptism.
- Clement of Rome - likely disciple of Peter - martyred under Domitian
- Ignatius of Antioch - likely disciple of John - martyred under Trajan
- Polycarp of Smyrna - likely disciple of John - martyred under Antonius

## THE MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP

- Smyrna – Revelation 2:9-11
  - "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life... the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death."
- This was Polycarp's church. In his youth, he knew John, the apostle who wrote Revelation. He was probably among the original recipients of the letter to Smyrna.

*The Roman proconsul took pity on Polycarp and urged him to recant. All he had to do was say, "Caesar is Lord," and offer a little bit of incense to Caesar's statue, and he would live. Polycarp's stalwart response: "Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" So, he was taken to the place of execution. One tradition states that, when the guards realized they had no nails or rope to affix him to the post, Polycarp assured them that no restraint was necessary—that Jesus would empower him to bear the flames. And that's how he died.*

## TEACHINGS OF THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

- Against Gnosticism - derived from Plato - matter is evil, spirit is good - "higher knowledge"
- Against Docetism - related to Gnosticism - Jesus only "seemed" to have a body. He wasn't literally a human. Ignatius - if Jesus didn't shed literal blood, then the Gospel is a lie. 1 and 2 John begin dealing with this heresy.
- Apostolic Succession - ministry of the apostles continued by an unbroken line of bishops (Catholic / Orthodox belief)
  - There is significant debate about whether the apostolic fathers actually believed this.
  - The Reformers believed this was an error. Scripture is clear - the apostles themselves cared far more about the succession of good theology.

## PRACTICES OF THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

- Baptism
  - Significant evidence that both infant and believer's baptism practiced at the same time, without issue.
  - North Africa – babies were baptized on the 8th day (link to circumcision)
  - Didache (section 7) - running water preferred (stream or river) but pouring was permitted. Mode didn't seem to matter. Water necessary, done in the name of the Trinity.
- The Lord's Supper
  - Strong early connection to the Jewish Passover
  - Only for professing believers
  - Foot washing was common in many places.
  - Usually practiced in the context of an actual meal (called a “love feast”) and not necessarily during a worship service, until the 4th century

## APPLICATION FOR TODAY

- Martyrdom
  - There have been more Christian martyrs in the past 100 years than in the previous 1900 years combined!
  - “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” – Matthew 10:28
  - “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” – 1 Peter 4:12-14
- Error Comes Quickly
  - “One generation knows the Gospel, the next assumes it, and the third loses it.” – D.A. Carson
  - The grandson of Moses was a cult leader.
  - The grandsons of David fragmented the kingdom.
  - The first few generations after the Apostles did a pretty decent job staving off heresy, but problems slowly start to spread.
- Discussion: Should we divide churches over differences of opinion regarding baptism?