

Perspectives on Church History: Where we've come from and how we got here  
Unit 1: The Ancient Church (6 BC to AD 590) – The Ancients were people just like us  
Part 4: From the Apostles to the Apostolic Fathers (AD 64 – 177)

1. Last time: Even before the division between Judaism and Christianity was complete with the destruction of the temple in AD 70, the followers of Jesus had known both ambivalence and oppression from Rome and from Jerusalem. Judaism was a *religio licita*, or legal sect, within Rome, and this status protected the young church.

Once Christianity was viewed as a separate faith, however, it became an illegal religion and was then considered a threat to the safety of the Roman state. For the Roman, religion could be tolerated only as it contributed to the stability of the state. This new religion seemed to undermine that stability on virtually all fronts. The universal church conflicted with the universal state. At the same time, that universal state had unwittingly laid the groundwork for the spread of the faith, even as oppression against Christians spread throughout the empire. God uses human factors to produce spiritual results, even when those human factors seem entirely at odds with God's purposes.

2. Overview: To this point, we have studied the Ancient Church by identifying the contributions of Rome, Greece and Jerusalem to the growth of the young faith. We have also discussed certain critical events in the development of Christianity from a sect within Judaism to a distinctly separate faith. Just like a study of the history of colonial America will eventually include a discussion of key individuals who were critical to the emergence of the United States, the history of the early church also features the contributions of key leaders.

Before we leave the era of the New Testament completely, then, we start with the first leaders of the Apostolic Church:

Peter – With Pentecost, Peter emerged as the leader of the early church, preaching the Spirit-led sermon that produced 3,000 converts. Although he would fail at Antioch by withdrawing from fellowship with Gentile converts (remember our Galatians study in Chapter 2?), he would return to sponsor the spread of the gospel into the Gentile world.

- At the Jerusalem council in AD 49 (Acts 15), Peter would decisively defend Gentile church membership. Other than writing 1 and 2 Peter, however, there is no additional description of his role in the early New Testament church.
- There is no conclusive evidence to establish that he was the first bishop of Rome. Recent scholarship argues that the early church in Rome had a structure more presbyterian in nature well into the second century. Those same scholars contend that the Roman church was decentralized as late as the fourth century. Tradition, more than anything else, holds that Peter was the leader of the church of Rome.
- Of course, the end of his life is also the subject of church tradition. The mode of his crucifixion upside down is based on tradition. Even so, most scholars agree he indeed died the death of a martyr during Nero's persecutions.

John – the brother of James and son of Zebedee was Peter's co-laborer. When he left Jerusalem is unknown, but it is likely he was present with Peter at the Jerusalem Council.

- John was exiled to Patmos, likely by Domitian in the early nineties, for his preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus. It was there where he recorded his visions as recorded in the Book of Revelation, the final book of Scripture.
- Eventually released from exile, it is thought that he most likely ended in Ephesus. There, he trained future church fathers: Polycarp, Papias, and Ignatius. Each of these disciples of John would become leaders of the second-century church.
- John gives emphasis to the work of the Holy Spirit, as seen especially in his recollection of Jesus' discourse in the upper room (Chapters 14-16).
- "John's most significant contribution to the church was his writing. His Gospel is unique. Only eight percent of it is related in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke; the remaining 92 percent is original with John. Most exceptional is his development of the deity of Christ. Jesus is the eternal *Logos* (1:1-18), who is the great 'I am' (8:58)." Eckman, p. 10.

Paul – religiously a Jew, culturally a Greek, politically a Roman, Paul was trained as a Pharisee but showed familiarity with Greek writing and Greco-Roman thought. One can speculate that his Roman citizenship also played a significant

role in his ministry. Because Pharisees were intolerant of different religious attitudes, his activity of extraditing “people of the Way” from Damascus to Jerusalem was certainly a common occurrence at the time of his conversion experience.

- Claiming to be the central missionary to the Gentiles, Luke’s writings tend to sustain this claim. Paul’s first missionary journey may have been the most noteworthy.
- “During that trip (Acts 13-14), Paul and Barnabas evangelized Cyprus and the southern part of Galatia. As Gentile churches flourished, two fundamental questions surfaced: What was the relationship between Christianity and Judaism? How is a person justified? A Judaistic group from Judea insisted circumcision was necessary for salvation – something that contradicted Paul’s free-grace gospel. Hence, the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15.  
“The council affirmed Paul’s free-grace gospel, adding only that Gentile converts abstain from certain practices. Thus the mother church affirmed Paul’s ministry of justification by faith plus nothing! Following the council, Paul embarked on two additional missionary journeys that are recorded in Acts 15:26—21:16.” Eckman, p.10.
- After these trips, he returned to Jerusalem to report about his work. It was there that Roman authorities arrested him on false charges. He was imprisoned in Caesarea and stood trial; however, by asserting his Roman citizenship, he was able to appeal to Caesar and was move to Rome, where he went under house arrest.
- Paul was later released and continued to minister, perhaps for six more years. Some scholars claim he worked in Asia Minor and Greece and perhaps even Spain before he was arrested as Nero’s persecutions reached their height. It has been concluded that he most likely was decapitated in the spring of AD 68.

3. The Church Fathers: With the passing of the Apostles, issues inevitably arose regarding the leadership of the still small but flourishing church. A group known to us as the “Church Fathers” would come to lead the faith into its next century. “As a term of affection and esteem, ‘father’ was generally given to spiritual leaders of the church (known as elders or bishops). The Fathers can be divided into three groups: The Apostolic Fathers (A.D. 95-150), the Apologists (A.D. 150-300), and the Theologians (A.D. 300-600). The Apostolic Fathers wrote what was generally devotional and edifying in nature; the Apologists [mentioned briefly in the last lesson] produced literature that defended the faith and countered error; and the Theologians began doing systematic theology.” Eckman, p.15.

If you were a first century Christian, you gathered with other believers in homes for your church. A group of leaders would guide your local, essentially self-contained body. Those leaders might be called “elders,” “presbyters,” “overseers,” or “bishops” – regardless of the title, the role was essentially the same, to lead a local congregation of the church. Soon after professing faith in Christ, a new convert was baptized. It was this form of the faith for which the Apostolic Fathers would assume leadership.

By the second century, however, and into the third and beyond, believers were organizing themselves above the local level. In most cities, one overseer was likely to direct other elders. Rather than homes, congregation usually worshipped in buildings they owned themselves. New converts likely received as much as three years of instruction before baptism. In some congregations, the elders baptized infants. In other gatherings, parents were urged to wait until their children confessed Christ for themselves. Even so, neither group condemned the other. This was the setting for the eras led by the Apologists and the Theologians, respectively.

What had brought about these changes in church structure? In short, Christians sought to preserve the truth about Jesus. A formidable foe had grown to threaten such truth, however – Gnosticism, the “secret knowledge movement.” Other similar foes lurked nearby. In time, and due in no small part to the leadership of the Church Fathers, powerful overseers, central meeting places, and consistent training each developed to aid believers to confront enemies without and within the church.

The Church Fathers		
West	East	
<b>First Century (95–ca. 150)</b> <b>Apostolic Fathers—To Edify—Typological Interpretation</b>		
<b>Edification</b>		
Clement of Rome	Ignatius Polycarp Pseudo-Barnabas The Epistle to Diognetus The Second Epistle of Clement Papias <i>Shepherd of Hermas</i> (apocalyptic) <i>Didache</i> (catechetical manual)	
<b>Second Century (120–220) Apologists—To Defend Christianity</b>		
<b>Explanation</b>		
Tertullian	Aristides Justin Martyr Tatian Athenagoras Theophilus	
<b>Third Century (180–250) Polemicists—To Fight False Doctrine</b>		
<b>Refutation</b>		
<i>Practical</i> (polity)  Irenaeus vs. Gnostics Tertullian—founder of Western theology, “Trinity,” vs. Praxeas Cyprian on Episcopacy and primacy of honor of Roman bishop	<i>Alexandrian School</i> (Allegorical and speculative) Pantaenus Clement Origin— <i>Hexapla</i> (text of Old Testament) <i>De Principiis</i> (first systematic theology) used allegorical method of interpretation	<i>Antiochene School</i> (Grammatico-historical)
<b>Fourth Century (325–460) Golden Age of Scientific Bible Study</b>		
<b>Exposition</b>		
Jerome—translator of Bible Ambrose—preacher Augustine—philosophy of history in <i>City of God</i> ; theologian	Athanasius Basil of Caesarea	Chrysostom—preacher (Christian conduct) Theodore (use of context)

4. **The Apostolic Fathers:** These individuals wrote distinctively Christian literature and provided the next generation of leadership to the church from the end of the New Testament era to 150. Their writings reflected great understanding of and reliance on the Old Testament plus a conviction that the new faith was the fulfillment of the Old Testament. These writings do not, on the other hand, contain deep theological or doctrinal analysis. (Why do you think that might be the case?) The desire of these leaders was to edify and encourage the saints, and the goal was to provide followers the hope they needed to persevere. Their work has perhaps been best described as devotional and pastoral with an emphasis on “pietistic” (holy) living.

- Because the church was experiencing substantial growth and enthusiasm, the Apostolic Fathers believed that counsel and advice on spiritual growth and action was their first order. Their writings would emphasize

martyrdom and celibacy, with baptism also being stressed. These writings must be seen in the context of their times – in the pagan culture in which they were surrounded, their audience of believers needed to know how to live obedient lives and how to structure their church and worship.

a. Clement of Rome (AD 30-100): This bishop (elder) of Rome had one problem in common with Paul – dealing with the church in Corinth. He admonished the Corinthians to exercise love, patience, and humility as the basis upon which to build Christian relationships. He stressed obedience to church leadership as a means of ensuring harmony and unity, which always seemed to be in short supply among the Corinthians.

- His writing is the earliest example of Christian literature beyond the New Testament. Therefore, his letter is a key to understanding the influences on the early church. What is revealed are a number of references to the Old Testament, demonstrating how dependent the early church was on its authority. Paul's broad influence is also reflected in his writings, which shows just how critical Paul's thought was to early believers.
- Clement also stressed obedience to the leadership of the church. He reasoned that church elders had received their authority from the apostles, who received their authority from Christ. As you should know, this idea of succession would be expanded in the centuries to come.

b. Ignatius of Antioch (35 or 50 to between 96 to 117): A student of John, friend of Polycarp, and the third bishop of Antioch in Syria, he was arrested by Roman authorities for his Christian witness and testimony. In route to his martyrdom in the imperial games in Rome, he wrote a series of letters which have been preserved as an example of very early Christian theology. Important topics addressed in these letters include ecclesiology, the sacraments, and the role of bishops. His martyrdom was a key event in the growth of the church of his day.

- Ignatius preached against heresy (a form of Gnostic teaching) and stressed unity. He maintained that the best defense against the former and the best guarantee for the latter was submission to the bishop.
- This position reflected a change beginning to develop in the early church. A plurality of church leadership, that of elder and deacon, had been reflected in New Testament documents. As the church grew throughout Rome, however, local churches required greater authority and supervision. Perhaps that is why he directed elders and deacons to submit to a bishop who would superintend their local churches. This, he reasoned, was how false teaching could be addressed and unity promoted among the churches. Again, later generations of church leaders would expand upon his view of the office of bishop.

c. The Shepherd of Hermas: Written around 150 by a freed slave, this apocalyptic writing describes his five visions in a resemblance to the Book of Revelation. Relying on his own experiences and testimony, the writer stresses repentance and a call to holy living as the themes of the work, which depicts the evil in a declining civilization.

d. Polycarp: Also a disciple of John and a brave martyr, this bishop of Smyrna wrote a letter to the church at Philippi around 110 that was greatly valued then and very revealing to us now.

- The letter was filled with Old Testament quotations, but it also referenced several New Testament books then in circulation. Not only does this letter confirm Paul's influence but also it shows how the second-century church saw the books as authoritative. Polycarp was less concerned with church policy than his friend Ignatius but more focused on strengthening the practical lives of Christians.
- In 155, at age 86, Polycarp passionately defended his Lord at his trial and gave praise even as he died at the stake. He is said to be the embodiment of Tertullian's conviction that the "blood of martyrs is the seed of the church."

e. The Didache: Written sometime in the second century, the Didache is an example of catechetical literature, a literal manual of church life and practice. It contained counsel on baptisms, the conduct of worship services and communion, and how to exercise church discipline. Today it provides a valuable picture of life in the early church.

5. Next time: By the middle of the second century, around 150, the writings of church leaders began to shift. Theological error was creeping into the church on an increasing basis. There was an increasing need to move beyond the exhortation and devotion to address serious issues now prevalent in the church. As a result, the content of literature would become more apologetic to combat the threat of heresy. This development would usher in the second age of Church Fathers, and a new group would emerge: The Apologists.