**Church History # 2**

By Wilson Copeland

**The Apostolic Fathers (100-150 AD)**

**Introduction.**

**1. We said in our first lesson that it was the purpose of this series to give a brief outline**

**of the major events in the history of the church.**

a. We began by talking about the Lord’s church in the first century.

b. From the beginning, God had a plan for Jesus and his church.

c. His church (kingdom) was prophesied of in the O.T.

d. John and Jesus came preaching, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

e. The church was established on Pentecost (Acts 2).

f. The gospel was preached and the church grew (Book of Acts).

g. We did a brief overview of the church as Jesus established it.

\* Plan of salvation.

\* Worship

\* Work

\* Organization

**2. We also discussed the prophecies of a falling away that would come.**

a. Acts 20:28-30 – Warning that men would arise among church elders.

b. 1 Tim. 4:1-4 – “Some shall fall away from the faith”

c. 2 Tim. 4:3 – “For the time will come when they will not endure the sound

doctrine, but having itching ears, will heap to themselves teachers after their

own lusts.”

d. 3 Jn. 3 – A man named Diotrephes loved to have the preeminence.

3. **Tonight** – we will talk about some of the **non-inspired writers of the 2nd century**.

a. The term “**Apostolic Fathers**” refers to a group of early Christian writers between the years 100 and 150 A.D.

1) Their writings were not inspired (letters, epistles).

2) Their writings were in the form of letters, not books or pamphlets.

b. The “**Ante-Nicene Fathers**” are Christian authors from 100 to 325 A.D.

\* Ante = Before.

\* Nicene = City of Nicaea, where the first church council in 325 A.D.

4. It can be **very instructive** to read from the Apostolic Fathers, as well as all the ANF.

a. It can give us a glimpse of what **is** and **is not** going on in the early churches.

b. Although these men were not inspired, and although we see things mentioned

that we know are not consistent with the word of God, they are an interesting historical supplement to what we read in the NT.

**I. Clement of Rome**

A. **Clement** (around 100 AD)

1. Early disciple – connected with the city of Rome.

2. There is a Clement mentioned in Phil. 4:3, but there is no evidence

that this is the same man.

3. Clement is mentioned by other early writers – so although the details are

unclear, his existence and work at Rome are historically solid.

4. Most likely – Clement knew Paul and Peter, if Peter was in Rome.

5. Mattox – He was a was **one of three elders** at Rome (Linus, Anacletus,

Clement).

\* The Catholic church says he was one of the first popes.

\* There is no evidence for this. The whole concept of one man ruling a

church had not come yet, much less one man ruling the whole church.

6. Tradition says he was martyred by being cast into the sea tied to an

anchor.

**B. Clement’s letter to Corinth (around 100 AD).**

1. There was a problem in the church at Corinth (the rebellion of a young

man against the elders).

2. The church at Rome sent a letter to Corinth to encourage them to settle

the problem (most think written by Clement).

3. It was read at Corinth, and circulated to others churches, and some

claimed it was inspired – but Clement denied this.

4. 150 quotations from the OT as well as many from the NT.

**C. Things we learn:**

1. The church was governed by elders (plural), and there was no distinction

between elders and bishops.

2. Clement set forth that submission to the elders was the source of unity.

\* “The idea of submission to the elders as a basis for unity later prepared the way for obedience to “the” bishop, which was advocated by Ignatius and came to be a reality after the year 150.” (Mattox)

**II. Ignatius of Antioch**

**A. Ignatius**

1. Lived 35 – 108/140 A.D.

2. He was said (by historians) to be bishop at Antioch, although we know at

this early time there was a plurality of elders in each church. He very

likely could have been one of the elders (bishops).

3. Tradition tells us that he was martyred at Rome. Why he was

transported to Rome is not known. Tradition says he was cast to the lions

in the Colosseum.

**B. Ignatius’s different idea about the eldership.**

1. Mattox argues that there is a consistent pattern seen in the NT and in

the writings of the Apostolic Fathers concerning a **plurality of elders.**

2. But **Ignatius is the exception.**

a. He argues for one individual in each congregation to have

authority (thinking this would protect against heresy).

b. “Ignatius’s letters acknowledged that the bishop was not

necessarily the oldest among the elders, but was one whom God

called to that position. Ignatius argued that there should be one

bishop in charge of each congregation in order to prevent splits

and ensure correct beliefs were preserved.” (gotanswers.com)

c. Of course, from a scriptural standpoint we know that God

ordained a plurality of elders in every church. In addition, putting

one man over a congregation did not stop apostacy.

3. “Follow the bishop as Jesus Christ… the presbytery as the Apostles; and

respect the deacons… Let no man perform anything pertaining to the church without the bishop. Let that be considered a valid eucharist over which the bishop presides… It is not permitted either to baptize or to hold a love feast apart from the bishop.” (Ignatius, Epistle to the Smyrnaeans, Sec. VIII.)

4. His motivation was not power for himself or others – but apparently to provide unity and protection against heresy.

5. But there is no indication that he thought the Bishop’s authority should

go past the local congregation.

6. “The very fact that Ignatius labors at length to bring the “elders” into

submission to the “bishops” indicates that such as distinction did not exist at the time he wrote, but that he was working to bring it about.” (Mattox, p. 60-61).

a. This thinking was later accepted – and brought about a departure from the NT pattern.

🡪 b. It is a reminder that a small step away from the pattern can lead

to a much greater departure later on. One small step at a time.

**III. The Epistle of Barnabas**

A. **Author** – Barnabas.

1. Early historians thought this man was Barnabas, the companion of Paul,

but later historians did not believe that this is the case.

2. It was included as part of the Codex Sinaiticus – one of the oldest Bible

manuscripts.

**B. Date and Place of Composition**

1. Uncertain – Some say between 70-132 A.D.

2. Editors of the Ante-Nicene Fathers place it at **100 A.D.**

3. Many believe that it was composed in Alexandria, Egypt.

**C. Contents**

1. Epistle of Barnabas addresses the problem of Judaizers who taught that

the law of Moses was still in force.

a. Of course, the early church had problems with this issue.

b. Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews were written to address this.

c. Barnabas argues that the death of Jesus was sufficient for

salvation, and that the law is no longer binding on Christians.

2. The use of his arguments is **highly allegorical**.

a. Mattox suggests that this may have contributed to the allegorical

school of interpretation of Scripture that followed later.

3. **Strong moral exhortations** – which would suggest that there was a need

in this period for strong teaching regarding purity of life.

**IV. The Didache** (130-150 A.D.)

**A. *The Didache*, or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*.**

1. Author unknown.

2. Exact date of writing unknown, but usually dated around 150 A.D.

3. It was quoted as early as 200 A.D., so it had to be in existence by then.

**B. Two interesting texts.**

1. “Elect therefore for yourselves, bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord,

men that are gentle and not covetous, true men and approved.”

(Didache, Sec. 15).

a. This passage would again show the church choosing a plurality of

elders and deacons in the church.

b. No mention of a single bishop overseeing other elders.

2. “Baptize in this way… in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, in

living water, but if you have not living water, baptize in other water. And

if thou canst not in cold, in warm, if you have neither, pour water thrice

on the head…”

a. This is the earliest statement of anyone suggesting any other

mode of baptism besides immersion, even in a case of emergency.

**V. Papias** (125-150 A.D.)

A. Papias the Man

1. Lived in Hierapolis in Phrygia (Asia Minor, modern Turkey)

2. Exact dates cannot be established for his life, but he wrote in about the

year 140 A.D.

**B. His Writings**

1. Most of his work has been lost; we only know of his writings through the

authors Irenaeus and Eusebius.

2. Apparently, Papius gathered up the oral arguments of the Apostles that

had been received and wrote them down.

3. Interesting comments from Papias:

a. Said that Mark wrote his gospel while being with Peter and is an

exposition of Peter’s preaching.

b. Said the book of Matthew was written in Hebrew.

c. Referred to the officers of the churches as presbyters (elders), and

even called the apostles presbyters.

d. Eusesbius gives Papias credit for the earliest millennial views:

“Among them he says that there will be millennium after the resurrection of the dead, when the kingdom of Christ will be set up in material form on this earth. I suppose that he got these notions by perverse reading of the apostolic accounts, not realizing that they had spoken mystically and symbolically. For he was a man of very little intelligence, as is clear from his books. But he is responsible, for the fact that so many Christian writers after him held the same opinion, relying on his antiquity, for instance Irenaeus and whoever else appears to have held the same views.” (Mattox, p. 63-64, quoting Eusebius)

**VI. Polycarp (115-156 A.D.)**

A. His Life.

1. Lived at about 69-156 A.D.

2. He was said to have been a disciple of the apostle John.

3. Another Christian writer, Irenaeus, says that Polycarp was a companion

of the apostles and was appointed a bishop by “eye-witnesses and ministers of the Lord.”

\* Was a bishop/elder at Smyrna.

4. Irenaeus says that as a child he saw Polycarp and that that he taught the things he learned from the apostles.

B. His martyrdom.

1. Best known for his death – and his faithfulness to Jesus to the end.

2. He was arrested and threatened with death because he would not say

“Lord Caesar” and sacrifice to the Roman gods.

3. When brought before the proconsul he was told that his life would be

spared if he would revile Christ.

4. His answer: “For eighty and six years have I been his servant, and he has

done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

5. He added after further threatening with wild beasts and fire: “You

threaten with the fire that burns for a time, and is quickly quenched, for

you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgement to

come and in everlasting punishment.”

6. He was bound and burned at the stake.

7. **Caution:** I would only add this caution. Sometimes in church tradition,

statements like this come down to us as if there was a TV crew with video of the proceedings. Often we do not know for sure the exact statements that were made. They have been handed down over many years. **BUT** we can be very confident that Polycarp was a faithful child of God who gave his life for the Lord, refusing to deny his faith and refusing to worship the gods of the Romans, even if we do not know his exact last words.

**VII. Shepherd of Hermas** (140-150 A.D.)

**A. The Author**

1. A man named Hermas, a brother of Pius, bishop of Rome. (140-155).

2. Hermas had been a slave, who was freed by a wealthy woman who had

become a Christian.

3. He became a rich farmer and turned to a life of sin. After misfortune

took everything he owned, he turned his life to God.

**B. The Book**

1. The book deals with the subject of forgiveness of sins after one is a

Christian. (There was an early belief that if one sinned after baptism he

could not be forgiven.)

2. The Shepherd of Hermas was written to correct this misunderstanding.

3. The book takes the form of visions similar to the book of Revelation.

4. “The chief character is the angel of repentance in the form of a shepherd

and the book develops in detail the doctrine of repentance. This is the

earliest indication of the idea of penance as it later developed into a

sacrament.” (Mattox, p. 65).

**C. Other Points of Interest**

1. No distinction between elders and bishops (Mattox, p. 66)

2. Concerning baptism:

a. “We went down into the water and received remission of our

former sins.” (Mattox, p. 66)

b. “They go down into the water dead and come up alive.” (Mattox,

p. 66).

**Summary**

1. Reading and studying the Church Fathers and the Ante-Nicene Fathers gives us a

glimpse of what is and what is not going on in the early churches after the time of the

Apostles.

2. The many quotes in the ANF’s from the New Testament books would allow us to

completely reconstruct the NT just from these writings. (Gives added weight to the

accuracy of the NT that has come down to us.)

3. The churches were still governed by elders (plural) with no “head” bishop or “presiding”

elder. Ignatius’s argument for a ruling elder (bishop) over the others shows that it was

not the prevailing practice.

4. The basic practices of the early church are still unaltered.

\* Plurality of elders in each church.

\* Baptism for the remission of sins. (immersion)

\* Church worship – weekly LS, singing, prayers, etc.