

The Apostolic Fathers

by J.B. Galloway

The sermon explores the teachings and significance of the Apostolic Fathers, emphasizing their contributions to early Christian thought on holiness and unity.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 3:16, Ephesians 1:4, Philippians 1:21, Philippians 4:3, 1 Peter 1:15, 1 Peter 4:14, 1 Peter 4:16, 1 John 4:18

Topics: "Early Church History", "Christian Persecution"

Description

J.B. Galloway preaches about the period following the days of the apostles, focusing on the writings of the Apostolic Fathers like Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp. These early Christian writers served as a bridge between the apostolic era and the second century, emphasizing unity, holiness, and martyrdom. Clement of Rome's epistle to the Corinthians urges for holiness and unity, while Ignatius of Antioch's letters highlight sanctification, charity, and Christian perfection. Polycarp, a disciple of Saint John, exemplified unwavering faith and courage in martyrdom, emphasizing the importance of standing firm in the face of persecution.

Transcript

The First Light After The Days Of The Apostles

After the closing of the book of the New Testament it seems almost as if the Church had entered a dark tunnel of obscurity. The torch that had flamed forth from the hillsides of Judea was not eclipsed by the uncertainty of our knowledge of the history of those days, but it has continued to radiate its holy light to this day. We know very little of the history of the Church from the closing events of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles until the second decade of the next century. As we emerge from the shadows of the dark period following the days of the apostles, we find a number of writings which were written by the Apostolic Fathers. They were so-called because they immediately followed and were acquainted with the apostles. The earliest of these is Clement of Rome.

Clement Of Rome And His Epistle

Clement of Rome is the connecting link between the days of the apostles and the great stream of Christian writers which has continued unbroken from the second century. He has been identified with both the Clement mentioned by Paul in Philippians 4:3, and Flavius Clemens, a kinsman of Domitian, who was put to death by the latter for becoming a Christian. The ancient writer of the Epistle of Clement may be the

person that Paul referred to; for Eusebius, the father of church history, places his death in A.D. 95, about thirty years after the time that Philippians was written. In the epistle itself St. Paul and St. Peter are mentioned together as men "of our generation." Church history records that Clement was the third bishop of Rome. He may be the writer of this epistle. It is evident that Clement was a very great man in the estimation of the Church. The fact that the name of St. Clement was used in connection with the many legends that have gathered around his life is a proof of the great estimate in which he was held. Bishop Lightfoot, by studying his epistle, came to the conclusion that he was a Jewish Christian.

Two epistles are attributed to him. The first is universally received as genuine, but it seems certain that the second is not his. The Shepherd of Hermas calls him the author, and Hermas mentions that he knew him personally. The Epistle of Clement was written at Rome and carried by three members of the church at Rome to the church at Corinth. Its object was to exhort the church at Corinth to unity. One or two persons had started a schism and driven out the presbyters. The trouble seems to have started over the question of reestablishing the old ways that were vanishing from the ministry.

Clement Of Rome On Holiness

In the days of John the Church was already leaving its first love. Doubtless many, if not most, of those of the church at Corinth were living holy lives, but he would have them all united in this. He begins his epistle as follows:

The Church of God which is at Rome to the Church of God which is at Corinth, elect, sanctified, by the will of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord: grace and peace from the Almighty God, by Jesus Christ be multiplied unto you.

Effusion of Holy Ghost

In chapter two of the Epistle of Clement of Rome he speaks of the Holy Ghost coming upon them.

Thus a firm, and blessed, and profitable peace was given unto you; and an unsatiable desire of doing good, and a plentiful effusion of the Holy Ghost.

Life of Holiness

In chapters twenty-nine and thirty he exhorts the Corinthians to a life of holiness thus:

Let us therefore come to Him with holiness of heart, lifting up chaste and undefiled hands unto Him; loving our gracious and merciful Father, who hath made us to partake of His election Wherefore, we being the portion of the Holy One, let us do all these things that pertain unto holiness; fleeing all evil-speaking against one another.

Holiness Instead of Strife

Chapter forty-six is an exhortation for unity and holiness instead of division and strife.

Wherefore it will behoove us also, brethren, to follow such examples as these; for it is written, "Hold fast to such as are holy; for they that do so shall be sanctified." And again in another place He saith, "With the pure thou shalt be pure (and with the elect thou shalt be elect), but with the perverse man thou shalt be perverse." Let us therefore join ourselves to the innocent and righteous; for such as are elected of God.

Wherefore are there strifes, and anger, and divisions, and schisms, and wars, among us? Have we not all one God and one Christ? Is not one spirit of grace poured out among us all? Have we not one calling in Christ? Why then do we rend and tear in pieces the members of Christ, and raise seditions against our own body: and are come to such a height of madness as to forget that we were members one of another? Remember the words of our Lord Jesus, how He said, "Woe to the man (by whom offenses came)! It were better for him that he had never been born, than that he should have offended one of My elect. It were better for him that a millstone should be tied about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of My little ones." Your schism has perverted many, has discouraged many; it has caused diffidence in many, and grief in us all.

Also chapter forty-eight is along the same line as the preceding,

Let us, therefore, with all haste, put an end to this sedition; and let us fall down before the Lord, and beseech Him with tears that He would be favorably reconciled to us, and restore us again to a seemly and holy course of brotherly love. For this is the gate of righteousness, opening unto life: as it is written, "Open unto me the gates of righteousness; I will go in unto them, and will praise the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter into it." Although therefore many gates are opened, yet this gate of righteousness is that gate in Christ at which blessed are all they that enter in, and direct their ways in holiness and righteousness, doing all things without disorder. Let a man be faithful; let him be powerful in the utterance of knowledge; let him be wise in making an exact judgment of words; let him be pure in all his actions.

Perfect Love

He speaks of those who had the experience of perfect love, in chapter fifty.

All the ages of the world, from Adam to this day, are passed away; but they who have been made perfect in love have, by the grace of God, obtained a place among the righteous, and shall be made manifest in the judgment of the kingdom of Christ.

Just before closing his epistle, his soul cries out in prayer,

Guide thou our footsteps to walk in holiness and righteousness and singleness of heart, and to do all things that are good and well-pleasing in Thy sight and the sight of our rulers. Yea, Lord, show Thy countenance upon us for good in peace, that we may be sheltered by Thy mighty hand and delivered from all sin by Thy lifted up arm, and deliver us from those who hate us unrighteously. Give oneness of mind and peace unto us and all those that dwell on the earth, as Thou didst give to our forefathers who called upon Thee in Holiness, in faith and truth (Chapter Sixty).

A Peculiar People

Now, God, the overseer of all things, the Father of spirits, and the Lord of all flesh—who hath chosen our Lord Jesus Christ, and us by Him to be a peculiar people—grant to every soul of man that calleth upon His glorious and holy name, faith, fear, peace, long-suffering, patience, temperance, holiness and sobriety, unto all well-pleasing in His sight; through our high priest and protector Jesus Christ, by Whom be glory, and majesty, and power, and honor, unto Him, now and forevermore. Amen.

Ignatius Of Antioch And His Epistles

The second name among the Apostolic Fathers is that of Ignatius. He was appointed the bishop of Antioch about the year A.D. 70. This is the city where the disciples of Christ were first called Christians. St. Paul started from here on his great missionary journeys, and planted the Cross in the cities of Asia Minor and Greece. Then we lose sight of the city until the days of Ignatius. Little is known of his life. He was probably a disciple of St. John, and an ancient tradition makes him the little child whom our Lord took up in His arms, when He told His disciples that they must become like little children if they would enter the kingdom of Heaven. This cannot be proved. He is described as:

A man in all things like unto the apostles, that as a good governor, by the helm of prayer and fasting, by the constancy of his doctrine and spiritual labor, he exposed himself to the floods of the adversary; that he was like a divine lamp illuminating the hearts of the faithful by his exposition of the Holy Scriptures; and lastly, that to preserve the church, he doubted not freely, and of his own accord, to expose himself to the most bitter death.

We are not certain how long he was bishop at Antioch. But persecution arose, and he was condemned to be killed by the wild beasts in the arena and for that purpose he was taken to Rome, under a guard of ten soldiers. On his way he was allowed the hospitality of the Christians but at times was treated very cruelly by the "ten leopards," the soldiers. During this journey he wrote many epistles to the churches: Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, and Smyrnaean. Also he wrote to Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna. He suffered martyrdom between A.D. 107 and

117. The few bones that the wild beasts left were taken up by his friends and carried back to the city where he was bishop and were held as very precious jewels, and an annual festival was held in memory of him. Seven of his epistles are regarded as genuine; others are disputed.

Holiness In The Epistles Of Ignatius

Wholly Sanctified

From his Epistle to the Ephesians, chapter two, we read:

It is, therefore, fitting that you should by all means glorify Jesus Christ, who hath glorified you -- that by a uniform obedience you should be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment, and may all speak the same things concerning every thing; and, that being subject to your bishop and the presbytery, ye may be wholly and thoroughly sanctified.

Full of Holiness

From the ninth chapter of the same epistle we quote:

As being the stones of the temple of the Father, prepared for His building, and drawn up on high by the cross of Christ as by an engine, using the Holy Ghost as the rope: your faith being your support, and your charity the way that leads unto God. Ye therefore, with all your companions in the same journey, full of God: His spiritual temples, full of Christ, full of holiness; adorned in all things with the commands of Christ.

No Herb of Devil

Chapter ten reads:

Pray also without ceasing for other men: for there is hope of repentance in them, that they may attain unto God. Let them, therefore, at least be instructed by your works, if they will in no other way. Be ye mild at their anger, humble at their boasting; to their blasphemies, return your prayers; to their error, your firmness in the faith: when they are cruel, be ye gentle; not endeavoring to imitate their ways: (let us be their brethren in all kindness and moderation, but let us be followers of the Lord: for whom was ever more unjustly used? more destitute? more despised?) that so no herb of the devil may be found in you; but ye may remain in all holiness and sobriety both of body and spirit, in Christ Jesus.

Faith and Charity

He shows that a believer lives above sin in chapter fourteen.

Of all which nothing is hid from you, if we have perfect faith and charity in Jesus Christ, which are the beginning and end of life; for the beginning is faith and the end is charity. And these two, joined together, are of God; but all other things which concern a holy life are the consequence of these, No man professing a true faith sinneth; neither does he who has charity hate any. The tree is made manifest by its fruit; so they who profess themselves to be Christians are known by what they do.

God's Temple

The last quotation from this epistle that we offer is from chapter fifteen.

He that possesses the word of Jesus is truly able to hear His very silence, that he may be perfect; and both do according to what He speaks, and be known by those things of which he is silent. There is nothing hid from God, but even our secrets are nigh unto Him. Let us do all things as becoming those who have God dwelling in them, that we may be His temple, and He may be our God.

Just before closing his Epistle to the Magnesians, Ignatius says: "Knowing you to be full of God, I have the more briefly exhorted you."

Wheat of God

Ignatius shows his devotion in time of trial and his courage in the face of martyrdom as he writes in his Epistle to the Romans.

I am willing to die for God, unless you hinder me. I beseech you that you show not an unseasonable good-will toward me. Suffer me to be the food of wild beasts, by whom I will attain unto God. For I am the wheat of God; and I will be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. Let fire and the cross; let companies of wild beasts; let breaking of bones and tearing of members; let the shattering in pieces of the whole body, and all the wicked torments of the devil come upon me; only let me enjoy Jesus Christ.

Christian Perfection

In chapter eleven of his Epistle to the Smyrnaeans he recognizes that there are those who have reached Christian perfection. He writes:

For as much as ye are perfect yourselves, ye ought to think those things that are perfect. I would to God that all would imitate him [Burrhus], as a pattern of the ministry of God... Be strong in the power of the Holy Ghost.

The Martyrdom of Ignatius

From an ancient story of the martyrdom of St. Ignatius translated out of the original Greek in Spicileg Patrum, tome 2, we read an account of the trial and martyrdom of Ignatius. We quote the following:

Trajan (the Roman Emperor) -- "Dost thou carry Him who was crucified within thee?"

Ignatius -- "I do: for it is written, 'I will dwell in them.'" Then Trajan pronounced this sentence against him: "Forasmuch as Ignatius has confessed that he carries about within himself Him that was crucified, we command that he be carried, bound by soldiers, to the great Rome, there to be thrown to the beasts, for the entertainment of the people." When the holy martyr heard this sentence, he cried out with joy, "I thank Thee, O Lord, that Thou hast vouchsafed to honor me with a perfect love toward Thee."

Martyrs Perfected

The writer of this story tells how Ignatius was devoured by the wild beasts, except a few of the larger bones. And he says that he was an eyewitness to how this holy martyr perfected the course he had piously desired in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Polycarp, A Disciple Of Saint John

Polycarp was another one of the Apostolic Fathers. He was the bishop of Smyrna and one of the most celebrated of the early Christian martyrs. We have little information concerning his life. Such meager information as we have about his life is found in the writings of Irenaeus, Eusebius, and the anonymous Martyrdom of Polycarp. He was born about A.D. 69. As a youth he was acquainted with and later became a disciple of John. When Ignatius passed through Asia Minor on his way to Rome to be martyred he stopped and visited Polycarp, who was a bishop at that time. He afterwards addressed a letter to him. One of the last things that Polycarp did was to go to Rome to consult with the bishop there on the question of Easter. Soon after his return he was arrested by the Roman officers, tried on the charge of being a Christian, and condemned to death by burning. He was taken by the soldiers in a house near the city where he had taken refuge. He declined to avail himself of an opportunity to escape. When he was required to curse Christ, he answered: "Six and eighty years have I served Him, and He hath done nothing but good; and how could I curse Him, my Lord and my Saviour!" Refusing to renounce the faith, he was burned to death February 23, A.D. 155. such was the holiness of his life and such his heroism in martyrdom that he has been held ever since with the deepest veneration. He is said to have written several epistles, only one of which has come down to us.

Polycarp on Holiness

In Ignatius' Epistle to Polycarp he called him most holy Polycarp and exhorts him, "Stand firm and immovable as an anvil when it is beaten upon. It is the part of a brave combatant to be wounded, and yet to overcome." In Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians he advises them to call to mind the doctrine which Paul taught them and exhorts all classes of Christians to holy living and Christian activities.

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