

Lecture 4: The Apostolic Fathers: Clement of Rome and Polycarp of Smyrna

Dr. Nathan Busenitz · The Master's Seminary · 71 minutes

Here the course steps past the New Testament into the men the apostles themselves trained. Busenitz introduces the apostolic fathers, reads at length from Clement of Rome's letter to Corinth, written in the 90s while John was on Patmos, and then walks through one of the oldest martyrdom accounts in existence, the death of Polycarp. Listen for how much of what you believe is already on their lips.

STUDY SHEET: THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

01

Into the patristic period

Patristic comes from the word for fathers, and Busenitz assigns the patristic period the church's first five hundred years, giving history four clean quadrants of five centuries each. After John died there were no more apostles, and the fathers never called anyone by that title again; leaders were pastors, elders, and bishops, with bishop still meaning what the Bible means by it, a shepherding overseer, not what Rome or Constantinople would later make of the word.

02

The 2 Timothy 2:2 principle

Writing from the dungeon shortly before his death, Paul packed four generations into one sentence: Paul, then Timothy, then faithful men, then the others they would teach. Studying the early church means actually meeting generations two, three, and four. Timothy pastored Ephesus for decades under the apostle John's oversight, and nearly all the earliest leaders we know are men of Asia Minor connected to John. The church did not fall off a cliff when he died; the apostles had built for exactly that moment.

03

Who the apostolic fathers are

The apostolic fathers are not the fathers of the apostles but their disciples, the first generation of leaders after them: Clement of Rome (never to be confused with the later Clement of Alexandria), Ignatius of Antioch, whom tradition says Peter installed, the later Barnabas of Alexandria (not the Barnabas of Acts), Papias of Hierapolis, and Polycarp of Smyrna, together with anonymous works: the Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the letter to Diognetus. Persecution destroyed much of what this generation wrote; some works survive only as titles other authors mention.

04

Respect without authority

These men are not inspired and not authoritative, but they carry firsthand knowledge of apostolic teaching, and dismissing them as confused novices, as some modern scholarship does, forgets who trained them. Reading them is the nearest thing to sitting with the men who were disciplined by John.

Clement of Rome

By Roman tradition Clement was Rome's fourth pastor, after Peter, Linus, and Cletus, which makes him, in Roman Catholic reckoning, the fourth pope; though Romans 16 shows a thriving, well led church in Rome before Peter ever arrived, so Peter was not its first pastor. Clement was likely the Clement of Philippians 4:3, Paul's fellow worker. He wrote one surviving letter, to the Corinthians, in the mid 90s, while John sat exiled on Patmos; Eusebius records that it was read publicly in many churches for generations. A second letter and some epistles on virginity that bear his name are not his.

Corinth divided again

Forty years after Paul wrote to a fractured Corinth, and after tradition says Apollos had returned and pastored the church for decades, division erupted there again, loudly enough that other churches heard of it. Clement, one pastor writing to another congregation, not an apostle issuing Scripture, wrote to call them back from backbiting to concord.

Justified by works, and not by words

In chapter 30 Clement sounds like James: let your justification be shown by deeds, not mere profession, and let the testimony to your good works come from others rather than from your own mouth. A claimed faith that leaves conduct unchanged is a claim in question. Busenitz notes that Roman Catholic debaters quote this chapter alone; the letter does not stop there.

The clearest early statement of faith alone

Two chapters later Clement writes that we, called through God's will in Christ Jesus, are not justified through ourselves, nor through our own wisdom or understanding or piety or works wrought in holiness of heart, but through faith, by which Almighty God has justified all men from the beginning. Busenitz calls chapter 32 one of the clearest and earliest statements of justification by grace alone through faith alone in church history, written by the man Rome counts as its fourth pope, and promises a later lecture with dozens more like it from across the fathers.

Clement's Romans 6 move

Immediately, like Paul after Romans 5, Clement asks the obvious objection: shall we then idly abstain from doing good? May the Master never allow it; rather let us hasten with zeal to every good work. Root and fruit: the root of justification is grace through faith, the fruit is a changed life. James and Paul never disagree; they describe the two ends of the same salvation, the balance Luther, Calvin, and, Busenitz adds, The Gospel According to Jesus all defend.

Not Scripture, and never claimed to be

Early churches read Clement's letter for edification, but no one placed it in the canon, because it carries no apostolic authority; the church recognized the canon rather than creating it. The fathers quote the New Testament so constantly, tens of thousands of citations across the patristic era, that nearly the whole of it could be reconstructed from their writings alone: men committed in practice to Scripture as the final word. Tradition says Trajan had Clement drowned early in his reign.

11

Polycarp of Smyrna

Polycarp, roughly AD 69 to 155, was a disciple of the apostle John, a friend of Ignatius, a companion of Papias, and the teacher of Irenaeus: the four generation chain visible in living men. He pastored Smyrna, one of the seven churches of Revelation, fittingly shepherded by a disciple of the man who recorded it. One letter of his survives, to the Philippians, along with the Martyrdom of Polycarp, among the earliest genuine martyrdom accounts, written down within a few generations of his death.

12

Eighty and six years

Arrested in old age, urged by the proconsul to swear by Caesar's fortune and cry away with the atheists, the name pagans gave Christians for denying the visible gods, Polycarp waved at the pagan crowd and said it of them instead. Pressed to curse Christ, he answered: eighty and six years I have served him and he never did me any injury; how can I blaspheme my King and my Savior? Threatened with fire, he replied that their fire burns an hour, while they know nothing of the fire of coming judgment. The crowd, Jews and pagans together, called him the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the overthrower of their gods, and he was burned alive.

13

What the martyrdom account quietly proves

Polycarp's final prayer thanks the Father for counting him worthy of the martyrs' cup and gives glory to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together. Busenitz draws out what is absent and present: no prayer to saints or to Mary, which did not exist in this period; a plainly Trinitarian doxology two centuries before Nicaea, against the modern claim that the Trinity was invented there, with even the pagan Pliny reporting Christians worshiping the crucified Messiah as God; and no soul sleep, the account rejoicing that Polycarp is now with the apostles glorifying God, absent from the body and present with the Lord. The detail that the flames would not consume him and a sword was needed may be a sprinkling of legend on an otherwise sober record.

14

Why doctrine gets articulated when it does

Answering a student, Busenitz explains that formal articulation usually follows challenge. The Gnostics' docetism, from a word meaning appearance, denied Christ's real body because they thought matter evil, so John insisted the Spirit confesses Christ come in the flesh. Christ's deity went formally undefined for centuries because no one denied it, until Arius, a deacon of Alexandria who could not make the math of the Trinity work, demoted the Son to a created being, and the church answered at Nicaea, articulating what it had always believed. The creed did not create the conviction; the challenge forced its precision.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

2 Timothy 2 · Philippians 4 · Romans 6 · Romans 16 · James 2 · Ephesians 2 · Titus 3 · 1 John 4 · 2 Corinthians 5 · Revelation 2

KEY TERMS

Patristic period

The age of the church fathers, in this course the first five hundred years of church history.

Apostolic fathers

The first generation of leaders after the apostles, the apostles' own disciples: Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Papias, and the anonymous early writings.

Extant

Surviving to the present; only a fraction of what this generation wrote is extant.

1 Clement

Clement of Rome's letter to a divided Corinth, written in the mid 90s, the earliest surviving Christian document outside the New Testament.

Root and fruit

The lecture's shorthand for justification: grace through faith as its root, a changed life of good works as its fruit; James and Paul describing one salvation.

The Didache

The anonymous Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, an early summary of apostolic instruction, valued but never canonical.

Docetism

The Gnostic claim, from a word meaning appearance, that Christ only seemed to have a body; answered by John's insistence that Christ came in the flesh.

The atheist charge

Rome's accusation against Christians, who denied the visible pantheon and worshiped an invisible God.

COMPREHENSIONCHECK:FOURTEENQUESTIONS

1. What does the term apostolic fathers mean?

- A. The fathers of the apostles
- B. The apostles' own disciples, the first generation of leaders after them
- C. The medieval popes
- D. The authors of the four Gospels

2. How long does this course reckon the patristic period?

- A. One hundred years
- B. The first five hundred years of church history
- C. Until the year 1054
- D. Until Constantine

3. What four generations does Busenitz find in 2 Timothy 2:2?

- A. Peter, Mark, Luke, John
- B. Paul, Timothy, faithful men, and the others they would teach
- C. Prophets, priests, kings, and scribes
- D. Apostles, bishops, cardinals, and popes

4. Why was Peter not the first pastor of the church in Rome?

- A. He never visited Rome
- B. Romans 16 shows a functioning church with named leaders before he arrived
- C. Nero forbade it
- D. Paul held the office first

5. When did Clement write his letter to the Corinthians?
 - A. The mid 90s, while John was exiled on Patmos
 - B. Immediately after Pentecost
 - C. After Nicaea
 - D. During Paul's lifetime
6. What occasioned Clement's letter?
 - A. A famine in Corinth
 - B. Division and infighting had erupted again in the Corinthian church
 - C. A request for a new pastor
 - D. A dispute over the calendar
7. In chapter 30, whose teaching does Clement echo when he says we are justified by works and not by words?
 - A. James
 - B. Moses
 - C. Plato
 - D. Caesar
8. According to Clement's chapter 32, through what are we justified?
 - A. Our own piety and holiness of heart
 - B. Our wisdom and understanding
 - C. Faith, by which God has justified all from the beginning
 - D. Our works wrought in holiness
9. How does Clement answer the objection that grace makes good works pointless?
 - A. He concedes the point
 - B. May the Master never allow it; hasten with zeal to every good work
 - C. He removes the demand for works entirely
 - D. He appeals to the emperor
10. Why was Clement's letter never counted as Scripture, though churches read it?
 - A. It was written in Latin
 - B. It contained errors the church condemned
 - C. It carried no apostolic authority, and the church recognized rather than created the canon
 - D. It was lost until the Reformation
11. Which chain of discipleship does Polycarp anchor?
 - A. Peter to Mark to Clement
 - B. John to Polycarp to Irenaeus
 - C. Paul to Luke to Ignatius
 - D. James to Jude to Papias
12. What was Polycarp's famous answer when told to curse Christ?
 - A. I appeal to Caesar
 - B. Eighty and six years I have served him, and he never did me any injury
 - C. Let me consult the church
 - D. I never knew him

13. Why did Romans call Christians atheists?

- A. Christians denied the visible pagan gods and worshiped an invisible God
- B. Christians refused to pray at all
- C. Christians denied life after death
- D. Christians worshiped the emperor only

14. What does Polycarp's final prayer show about worship in his day?

- A. Prayers were addressed to Mary and the saints
- B. The Trinity was unknown before Nicaea
- C. Glory was given to Father, Son, and Spirit together, with no prayers to saints
- D. Prayers were forbidden at executions

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 B · 3 B · 4 B · 5 A · 6 B · 7 A · 8 C · 9 B · 10 C · 11 B · 12 B · 13 A · 14 C

TALKITOVER

1. Clement told the Corinthians to let others testify to their good works rather than commending themselves. How would our speech about ourselves change if we took that seriously?
2. The root of justification is faith; the fruit is a changed life. Which end of that balance does your own heart tend to neglect, and what does this lecture give you to correct it?
3. Polycarp served Christ eighty six years before the day his faith cost him everything. What habits built over decades made that hour possible, and which of them are you building now?

ONEVERSETOCARRY

Clement's confession, echoing Paul: we are not justified through ourselves or our works, but through faith, by which Almighty God has justified all his people from the beginning.

GOFURTHER

The lecture reads at length from 1 Clement and the Martyrdom of Polycarp, both short enough to read in an evening, and mentions Stephen Nichols's For Us and for Our Salvation on the early church's Trinitarian faith.

Lecture by Dr. Nathan Busenitz, from The Master's Seminary's public channel. Study notes written from the lectures themselves and reviewed by Medina Community Church. medinacommunitychurch.org/historical-theology-1-4