



Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers

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Letters and small-scale theological treatises giving a rich and powerful articulation of the Christian faith.

The writings in this volume shed a glimmer of light, in an otherwise dark period, on the emerging traditions and organizations of the infant Church. They are a selection from a group known as the Apostolic Fathers, so-called because several of the authors were most likely disciples of the Apostles themselves. Like much of the New Testament, their writings take the form of letters, and for the most part deal with practical problems of the life of the early Church, as it struggled in the face of persecution to establish itself in the Roman world. They give us a picture of Christianity still drawing on the theology and traditions of its parent religion, Judaism.

Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers Details

Date : Published April 30th 1987 by Penguin Classics (first published October 30th 1968)

ISBN : 0140444750

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Format : Paperback 208 pages

Genre : Religion, Theology, History, Christianity, Church, Church History, Christian, Nonfiction

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From Reader Review Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers for online ebook

Lee Harmon says

If you're looking for a brief collection of early Christian writings, this one hits all the high points. For someone wanting a taste of the emerging church, Christianity in its infancy, nothing beats reading the letters and theological treatises themselves, and this is a good collection. Nothing fancy; the introduction is short and the notes are sparse, limited primarily to historical settings, so you're getting it from the horses' mouths.

And what you're getting is the founding Fathers, after the excitement of the first century and its expectation of the immediate return of Christ died down. The men who took the scriptures seriously and built a religion for the long haul. Jewish customs are still evident, early doctrine is solidified, martyrs are glorified. Here's the lineup:

The first epistle of Clement to the Corinthians

Seven epistles of Ignatius

The epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians

The martyrdom of Polycarp

The epistle of Diognetus

The epistle of Barnabas

The Didache

This is a Penguin Classic, translated by Maxwell Staniforth with commentary by Andrew Louth.

Alexander Maher says

We hold Christ's words as God's, and the Apostles' as breathed by God, but what Christian writings, next to these, could be more beneficial and instructive but the teachings of those who studied at the feet of the Apostles? It is from these that we can glimpse a picture of how the early Church was structured, and the doctrines of the Apostles which were not specifically enumerated in their Epistles. The fallibility of these documents is also striking, in that even though they come from a similar time to the Apostolic Epistles, they are evidently the works of men, not God.

"The heavens, as they revolve beneath His government, do so in quiet submission to Him. The day and the night run the course He has laid down for them, and neither of them interferes with the other. Sun, moon, and the starry choirs roll on in harmony at His command, none swerving for its appointed orbit." - Clement of Rome's Epistle to the Corinthians

"... Let us be earnestly, even passionately, eager to set about any kind of activity that is good. Even the Architect and Lord of the universe Himself takes a delight in working... Above all, with His own sacred and immaculate hands he fashioned man, who in virtue of his intelligence is the chiefest and greatest of all His works and the very likeness of His own image; for God said, Let us make man in our image and likeness; and God created man, male and female he created them... We see, then, that good works have not only embellished the lives of men, but are an adornment with which even the Lord has delighted to deck Himself; and therefore with such an example before us, let us spare not effort to obey His will, but put all our energies

into the work of righteousness." - Clement of Rome's Epistle to the Corinthians

"By all means be pugnacious and hot-headed, my brothers, but about things that will lead to salvation. Just take a look at the sacred scriptures; they are the authentic voice of the Holy Spirit, and you know that they contain nothing that is contrary to justice, nor is anything in them falsified." - Clement of Rome's Epistle to the Corinthians

"It was in love that all God's chosen saints were made perfect; for without love nothing is pleasing to Him." - Clement of Rome's Epistle to the Corinthians

"That is why it is proper for your conduct and your practices to correspond closely with the mind of the bishop. And this, indeed, they are doing; your justly respected clergy, who are a credit to God, are attuned to their bishop like the strings of a harp, and the result is a hymn of praise to Jesus Christ from minds that are in unison, and affections that are in harmony. Pray, then, come and join this choir, every one of you; let there be a whole symphony of minds in concert; take the tone all together from God, and sing aloud to the Father with one voice through Jesus Christ, so that He may hear you and know by your good works that you are indeed members of His Son's Body." - Ignatius of Antioch's Epistle to the Ephesians

"Faith is the beginning, and love is the end; and the union of the two together is God." - Ignatius of Antioch's Epistle to the Ephesians

"We have seen how former adherents of the ancient customs have since attained to a new hope; so that they have given up keeping the sabbath, and now order their lives by the Lord's Day instead (the Day when life first dawned for us, thanks to Him and His death)" - Ignatius of Antioch's Epistle to the Magnesians

"Certain people declared in my hearing, 'Unless I can find a thing in our ancient records, I refuse to believe it in the Gospel'; and when I assured them that it is indeed in the ancient scriptures, they retorted, 'That has got to be proved'. But for my part, my records are Jesus Christ; for me, the sacrosanct records are His cross and death and resurrection, and the faith that comes through Him. And it is by these, and by the help of your prayers, that I am hoping to be justified." - Ignatius of Antioch's Epistle to the Philadelphians

"They even absent themselves from the Eucharist and the public prayers, because they will not admit that the Eucharist is the self-same body of our Saviour Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins, and which the Father in His goodness afterwards raised up again." - Ignatius of Antioch's Epistle to the Smyrnaeans

"Abjure all factions, for they are the beginning of evils. Follow your bishop, every one of you, as obediently as Jesus Christ followed the Father. Obey your clergy too, as you would the Apostles; give your deacons the same reverence that you would to a command from God. Make sure that no step affecting the church is ever taken by anyone without the bishop's sanction. The sole Eucharist you should consider valid is one that is celebrated by the bishop himself, or by some person authorised by him." - Ignatius of Antioch's Epistle to the Smyrnaeans

"Whom no senses can reveal
Was for us made manifest;
Who no ache or pain can feel
Was for us by pain oppressed;
Willing all thing to endure,
Our salvation to procure." - Ignatius of Antioch's Epistle to Polycarp

"To put it briefly, the relation of Christians to the world is that of a soul to the body. As the soul is diffused through every part of the body, so are Christians through all the cities of the world. The soul, too, inhabits the body, while at the same time forming no part of it; and Christians inhabit the world, but they are not part of the world. The soul, invisible herself, is immured within a visible body; so Christians can be recognised in the world, but their Christianity itself remains hidden from the eye... The soul, which is immortal, must dwell in a mortal tabernacle; and Christians, as they sojourn for a while in the midst of corruptibility here, look for incorruptibility in the heavens." - The Epistle to Diognetus

"You can see what He is saying there: 'It is not these sabbaths of the present age that I find acceptable, but the one of my own appointment: the one that, after I have set all things at rest, is to usher in the Eighth Day, the commencement of a new world.' (And we too rejoice in celebrating the eighth day; because that was when Jesus rose from the dead, and showed Himself again, and ascended into heaven.)" - The Epistle of Barnabas

"Never do away with an unborn child, or destroy it after its birth" - The Epistle of Barnabas

"The procedure for baptising is as follows. After rehearsing all the preliminaries, immerse in running water 'In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost'. If no running water is available, immerse in ordinary water. This should be cold if possible; otherwise warm. If neither is practicable, then sprinkle water three times on the head 'In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost'. Both baptiser and baptised ought to fast before the baptism, as well as any others who can do so; but the candidate himself should be told to keep a fast for a day or two beforehand." - The Didache

"Assemble on the Lord's Day, and break bread and offer the Eucharist; but first make confession of your faults, so that your sacrifice may be a pure one. Anyone who has a difference with his fellow is not to take part with you until they have been reconciled, so as to avoid any profanation of your sacrifice." - The Didache

Nathan Albright says

It must be admitted that this is not a complete volume of the writings that are considered part of the Apostolic Fathers [1]. Even so, so long as the reader goes into this book knowing what materials are included it is certainly a thought-provoking read. The Apostolic Fathers are a group of people (some of them anonymous) who were thought to have been followers of the Apostles and thus faithful recorders of the traditions of the Apostles in an age of Christianity that is largely obscure. From the writings included in this series it is pretty clear that this was likely not the case. Of particular interest to readers of this book is the way that it is clear that there were tendencies already present in the late first and early second century AD that would also lead to the growing apostasy that one finds when looking at Post-Nicene Hellenistic Christianity. The roots of that problem were manifest pretty early on in some of the writings that we have, and examining that problem is a worthwhile one for those who seek to follow or understand biblical Christianity. Even if the Apostolic Fathers are a bit of a misnomer, they are still worth paying attention to for understanding the past as best as we can.

At about 200 pages, this book includes at least most of the material that would be considered among the Apostolic Fathers, though by no means all of it. After a general introduction and bibliography and note on the text, the translation includes the following materials: The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians (but not the message known as 2 Clement today), the seven legitimate epistles of Ignatius to the Ephesians,

Magnesians, Trallians, Romans, Philadelphians, Smyrnaeans, and Polycarp, the Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp, as well as the Epistle to Diogetus, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Didache. Not included are the fragments of Papias that survive, the Shepherd of Hermas (a lengthy writing), or the fragments of Quadratus that survive. While the book could certainly have been more complete, by including in an easy-to-read format the most important works that survive from the late first and early second century AD from what would become Orthodox/Catholic Christianity the translator has done a good service to readers, even if they are likely to be left with a great deal of questions.

Although there are a great many people who for one reason or another have sought to use the Apostolic Fathers and interest in them to burnish their own reputations or further their own agendas, these works defy easy categorization and present more questions than they provide answers. As a reader who comes from a different religious tradition than most people, I am fascinated by the problems that the writings demonstrate between early Christians and Jews and the distinctly non-biblical approach that many writers (including Ignatius and Barnabas in particular) took towards the whole Bible in response to their disagreements with Jews, similar to the responses taken by contemporary Hellenistic believers when faced with the ethical demands of the Bible when it comes to Sabbath, for example. It appears that as the problems of centralized authority and doctrinal drift were early problems faced in the first couple of centuries of Christianity that understanding these problems is important for seeing how it is that Christianity came to be so far from Christ Himself. Other readers may have other concerns, though, and this book provides plenty of room for reader to investigate their own questions about a wide variety of issues dealt with by the early Church of God.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2018...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2018...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2018...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2018...>

Michael O'Brien says

I think this book is a good reference because it shows that the earliest Christian writers --- those immediately after the time of the Apostles --- did, in fact, follow and base their teachings upon the teachings of the New Testament. Moreover, with the exception of one of these writings (which paraphrases certain scriptural passages), all quotations of scripture match the earliest Bible manuscripts -- as well as the Bible we have today. What is the importance of all this? It refutes the postmodern higher criticism that has been in vogue in colleges and liberal seminaries that the New Testament and Christian doctrine are not reliable and are assembled recollections of later Christian believers centuries later --- similar to the way that the Koran was developed.

Despite its utility, I gave it three stars. It's a little dry at times --- and the way the text is footnoted --- with all notes at the end of each writing, instead of at the bottom of the page --- is annoying. Even more so because some of the footnotes are pertinent to understanding what the Christian father is trying to say. Overall, I think this book is a good source for Christian theologians, scholars and teachers, but it's probably not engaging enough for average readers.

Christian Fauerso says

Modern Christians and churches who think of themselves as "New Testament" Christians or churches who identify as "New Testament" churches need to read such writings and come to terms with the reality of the actual New Testament church. Ancient writings such as these give us a window into the beginnings and roots of our faith. Much doctrine and theology is already assumed at these early stage before the councils ever took place, from church polity, to baptism, the Eucharist and much more. A definite must read and then after you have read it, taste it, chew it and then digest it.

Christine says

This is an incredible book. It is amazing that we can read writings of the saints and other Early Christian literature from the 2nd century AD today! Anyone who considers themselves even remotely Christian should read this book! It's full of amazing spiritual wisdom and knowledge. I will definitely be reading this again!

Thom Willis says

Contents:

I Clement to the Corinthians

Ignatius to the Ephesians

Ignatius to the Magnesians

Ignatius to the Trallians

Ignatius to the Romans

Ignatius to the Philadelphians

Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans

Ignatius to Polycarp

Polycarp to the Philippians

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

Epistle to Diognetus

Epistle of Barnabas

The Didache

Dan Glover says

Writings from the generation following the Apostles, some of whose lives and locations would have overlapped with the Apostles. Essential reading for Christians who want to know about the very next layer of the foundation of our spiritual house which Christ promised to build - the church - and which was laid directly on top of the Apostles and Christ himself, the chief cornerstone. When I first read several of these works around 20 years ago (at that time studying the post-Apostolic history of the churches in Philippi and

Ephesus), I felt that I had been cheated out of an inheritance through my growing up years in Evangelicalism; like I had been living in a nest on one branch of a tree and had never been told about the trunk that connected my branch with the roots.

After reading some of these epistles and The Didache again recently I was reminded how eye opening these works are and how every Christian ought to read them. Its our own story, after all.

This volume includes: The 1st epistle of Clement to the Corinthians -- The epistles of Ignatius : to the Ephesians ; to the Magnesians ; to the Trallians ; to the Romans ; to the Philadelphians ; to the Smyrnaeans ; to Polycarp -- The epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians and The martyrdom of Polycarp -- The epistle to Diognetus -- The epistle of Barnabas -- The Didache

Mark says

First and foremost I would like to thank James for giving me a copy of "**The Apostolic Fathers.**" I feel like I got a little taste of a Princeton Divinity School education when I finished reading this collection of primary source material. If only I could read these texts in the original Greek! This book is a fantastic collection of letters from Clement, Polycarp, Ignatius, Papias, and Diognetus. It was super interesting to read how these Church Fathers struggled with the faith in the first and second centuries after the events of the New Testament. A thoroughly enjoyable read.

Justin Evans says

Great stuff once you've got the background, obviously useless if you want to use these men's opinions to bolster your own theological/political agenda. Note to those doing so: you do not live in the Roman Empire, there is no such thing as the original spirit of Christianity, and your attempts to find such a thing are doomed to failure.

As for other kinds of reader: Ignatius and Clement were obviously very smart guys, and their opinions are worth considering (but the stories of their lives are even better). It's not quite like reading Paul, but it's pretty close. Polycarp, not so bright, and the other stuff descends into, at best, rhetorical moralizing, and, at worst, rhetorical versions of what we would call gnosticism. This period of history is one of the world's most fascinating, and these short letters or tracts are well worth reading for that reason alone.

Bob says

Summary: A collection of early, post-apostolic Christian writings concerned with the organization, leadership, worship, conduct, martyrs, and doctrinal teaching of the nascent church.

How does a movement that survives beyond its earliest leaders begin to define the structures and practices and teaching that will sustain and order its life? The canonical scriptures of the New Testament give us some account of the very early stages of that project for what would become the Christian church as it spread throughout the Roman empire, narrated in Acts. Paul's occasional letters articulate define core beliefs and apply them to questions of Christian practice and morality, particularly in this new situation of gatherings

comprised both of Jews and non-Jews. The pastoral letters address church leadership, its tasks and character. Other letters by Peter, James, and John and the writer to the Hebrews also make sense of the work of Christ arising out of its Jewish setting and how these new communities live set apart lives in the world.

These nascent churches were still very much a work in progress. The writings in this collection reflect the next stage in the church's development. They include the First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, seven epistles written by Ignatius enroute to martyrdom in Rome, the Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians as he faces martyrdom and an account of that martyrdom, the Epistle to Diognetus, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Didache.

A common concern in a number of these writings is the distinctive character Christians are to exhibit in the world in their love for each other, their abstinence from sexual and other forms of immorality, their generosity in giving and refraining from the love of money, and their faith. Clement and Ignatius and the Didache repeatedly emphasize obedience to the bishops and deacons who are to serve with diligence and care.

A number of these writings include calls to "stand firm" in the Lord. We hear how Ignatius regards his own impending martyrdom in Rome in his Epistle to the Romans:

"I must implore you to do me no such untimely kindness; pray leave me to be a meal for the beasts, for it is they who can provide my way to God. I am his wheat, ground fine by the lions' teeth to be made purest bread for Christ. Better still, incite the creatures to become a sepulchre for me; let them not leave the smallest scrap of my flesh, so that I need not be a burden to anyone after I fall asleep. When there is no trace of my body left for the world to see, then I shall truly be Jesus Christ's disciple."

The account of Polycarp's martyrdom includes his stirring testimony before the Governor:

"The Governor, however, still went on pressing him. 'Take the oath and I will let you go', he told him. 'Revile your Christ.' Polycarp's reply was, 'Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?' "

These works taught early Christians how to face similar martyrdom, should it come. Polycarp also exemplified better sense than some, eluding captors when he could, but calmly facing them when he could not.

In the Epistle to Diognetus, we have an early example of a Christian "apologetic," emphasizing the follies of both paganism and Judaism, the upright character of the Christian community, that functioned as the soul to the body of the world, the supernatural character of revelation, the mystery of the incarnation and a concluding section urging readers to faith. The Epistle of Barnabas gives us an early example of the allegorical reading of the Old Testament that reveals their spiritual meaning with the coming of Christ.

Finally the Didache gives us another example of Christian moral teaching defining the Two Ways (of Life and Death) and how those on each Way live. Much of these are concise exhortations, as relevant today as then. One example:

"Do not parade your own merits, or allow yourself to behave presumptuously, and do not make a point of associating with persons of eminence, but choose the companionship of honest and humble folk."

After this first part on the Two Ways is an early example of a "Church Manual" with instructions on baptism,

fast days (not on the same day as hypocrites!) and prayer, the Eucharist, welcoming itinerant Apostles and Prophets and distinguishing the genuine from the impostors, Sunday worship, local officials (bishops and deacons) and Eschatology.

There is much of profit here, in "overhearing" the order of early Christian congregational life, in understanding the early roots of practices we observe to this day, and in considering the faithfulness of these early believers and teachers. The Didache, for example, in its section on the Two Ways, offers a great rubric for personal examination of one's life, especially, perhaps, before taking the Eucharist.

For many of us, our knowledge of the two millenia of church history is one of the biblical narrative of the earliest Christians, perhaps a bit of Reformation history, and little more. These writings give us a glimpse of those who followed the Apostles, and how they began to work out the theology, organization, and character of Christian life entrusted to them.

Bojan Tunguz says

Most of us Christians who have read the New Testament at some point start asking ourselves "What comes next?" The New Testament writings were, after all, just the beginning of Christianity, and the Christian religion has spread very far and had a great amount of influence even during the lives of the Apostles. However, until fairly recently most of what we know about the second and third generation of Christians came to us through the writings of the subsequent generations, and there was very little interest in finding out what the "Apostolic Fathers" had to say in their own right. The last couple of centuries have seen reemergence of interest in these early writings, and today the interest in the early Church is perhaps at a long term high.

"Early Christian Writings" is a remarkable collection of several works by the prominent and well-known Apostolic Fathers: Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Ignatius of Antioch, etc. We discover that the faith and the themes that these writings represented were indeed a product of orthodox Christian thought, and easily reconcilable with both our own theological understanding and the New Testament writings. The writings bear all the signatures of the tumultuous times during which they were written. This manifests itself by the choice of themes: preparation and expectation of martyrdom, issues of church discipline and strife, organizational matters and the episcopal nature of the Church, and attitudes towards immoral behaviors that are prevalent in the pagan world. The writings are very inspiring and well worth reading.

I am not familiar enough with the original language(s) in which these works were written to give any meaningful comment on their translation. However, I do have some serious issues with the Kindle edition of this book. It seems that the book was re-formatted for the electronic edition using some kind of OCR software: there are many silly errors and mistakes, which are clearly the results of improper optical scanning. (My favorite one was the recurring reference to the "Spirit of the Lard." [sic.]

Aside from the obvious historical and theological value, this slender tome is of particular relevance for the Christians in the modern world. We live in the age that is increasingly hostile to the Christian thought and ethics, and it can be tempting to give in to despair or adopt a siege mentality and withdraw from the world entirely. However, it is important to remember that the early Church faced a very similar set of circumstances, and the lesson from that era are incredibly relevant for the situations that we find ourselves in today. For that reason alone this book carries incredible value for all practicing and thoughtful Christians who want to have their voices heard in the contemporary society.

Bruce Strom says

The Early Christian Writings were not written by the Apostles as were the books of the New Testament, but were written by leading Christians of the next generation who may have known some of the surviving apostles. These included epistles, some of them written to the same Christian communities St Paul has addressed a generation previously. Many of these epistles are written in the style of the Pauline epistles, sometimes using liturgical forms, sometimes weaving in and out of a prayer on behalf of communities they were addressing.

These translations are superior to the translations in the Anti-Nicene Fathers volumes, they are very easy to read. Quite unfortunately, the Shepherd of Hermas and the Fragments of Papias were omitted “for reasons of space.” Included are such gems as the Didache and the Martyrdom of Polycarp, and many epistles from Ignatius, Clement, and others.

These Early Christian writings were from the generation after the Apostles, which was one of the criteria for inclusion in the canon of the New Testament. The Didache is the earliest of these writings, and is set in the early Church era when evangelists such as Paul traveled from one church to another preaching the Gospels. A few of these writings are treasured simply because they are so few writings surviving from that first formative century, which means they are more valuable historically than theologically.

For reviews of each of the selections in this collection of works, please visit my blog.

Miguel Dominguez says

It's pretty exciting to read letters from early Christians! There is encouragement, admonishment, and early theology! There are some writings glorifying martyrdom. Some of our Christian or Catholic beliefs (such as apostolic succession) are defended way back here in the second century.

That said, these letters do not quite meet the gold standard of the Bible. Barnabus and The Epistle to Diognetus are more negative about the Jewish religion than I think modern Christians should be. They are right to point out that Gentiles aren't beholden to the same practices, but to treat the Jews as veritable pagans is a bit much. Also, Ignatius of Antioch's confidence in bishops has to be qualified. He told us to obey bishops as if they were Christ. He did not imagine that bishops could be corrupt. We are called to obey our bishops, but we need to be careful when dealing with corruption.

Overall, this is a very elucidating volume, but maybe not something one should jump to if they're just finding their Biblical legs.

Nicholas Smith says

Wonderful collection of ancient wisdom

This short collection brings together a number of the earliest Christian texts that exist outside the bible. Reading these you have a real sense of the early church and their status as outsiders and using the teachings of Christ and the apostles in defiance of the prevailing times. I would highly recommend to anyone with an interest in the pre-Nicene church.
