

The Apostolic Fathers

Explanation

After the death of the original apostles, other leaders continued to write and teach their followers. Coming from the late first and second centuries A.D., some of the exhortations and doctrinal expositions of these early Christian leaders have survived to the modern era. Because chronologically they follow the apostles, and more importantly because some had been chosen and ordained bishops by men who were apostles, these authors are collectively identified by the term “apostolic fathers.”

As chart 18-1 shows, their writings reveal their struggle to maintain doctrinal purity in a rapidly growing church, for which the poor communication opportunities of the time were made more difficult by Jewish and sometimes Greek or Roman opposition to Christianity. The teachings of the apostolic fathers are varied and span a considerable time, but in general they can be categorized as (1) exhortations to Christians to continue righteous behavior, (2) explanations of Christianity to non-Christians, and (3) condemnation of doctrinal corruption and growing apostasy. Several of these writings were actually once included in early versions of the New Testament, but later they were removed by Constantine’s bishops.

Reference

J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. M. W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).

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APOSTOLIC FATHER	PROBABLE DATE	INTERESTING CONTENT
Papias	A.D. 60–130	Strong apocalyptic and millennial influence
Barnabas	A.D. 70–135	Testimony of Christ as the Creator, exhortation to the Saints to work the will of God
1 Clement	A.D. 95 or 96	Focuses on peace and concord among the Saints; influenced by popular Greek and Roman philosophies
Ignatius	A.D. c. 110	Exhortation to martyrdom
Polycarp, Letter to the Philippians	early II	Anti-docetist; seeks to prove that Christ came physically rather than in appearance only
Didache	early II	Manual for Christian behavior
Quadratus	A.D. 124–25	Earliest known Christian Apology, addressed to the emperor Hadrian
Hermas (possibly by multiple authors)	A.D. c. 140	A series of five visions showing allegorically the struggle of repentance
2 Clement (probably had a different author than 1 Clement)	A.D. 140–60	Sermon on self-control, repentance, and judgment
Martyrdom of Polycarp	A.D. 155–56	The first martyrdom narrative from the early church
Letter to Diognetus (author unknown)	A.D. c. 200	Early Christian Apology answering pagans' questions about the nature of Christianity