

“Love binds us to God”

Introduction to the series: *Following Jesus with the Apostolic Fathers*

In this series, each week we will read from some of the earliest Christian writings outside of the New Testament, a collection known as the *Apostolic Fathers*. Indeed, some of these writings are so close to the apostolic era that they were read during early Christian worship alongside the writings of the New Testament. In the *Apostolic Fathers* we encounter the good news as it was proclaimed in the life of the early church. Though that context was vastly different than our own, early Christians looked, as we do, to the good news and the living presence of Christ to guide them in their daily struggles and challenges.

One might ask, quite fairly, why some writings were included in the New Testament and other writings excluded. Over several centuries a process of selection occurred in which the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were eventually agreed upon in the early church. Inclusion in what became called the New Testament was a gradual process, and criteria for inclusion was related to their apostolicity, orthodoxy, antiquity and usage in the church. The diversity of theological outlook in the New Testament bears witness to a breadth and depth of faith. If a book was written in the apostolic age it carried more weight than later writings. How a book functioned within the life of the church’s liturgical and catechetical needs also helped determine its place in the canon. During the first five centuries, though many works were excluded because they were considered “heretical,” the *Apostolic Fathers* continued to be read and used during this period as faithful witnesses to the good news and apostolic teaching as received from Christ Jesus.

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130 – c. 202) first mentioned the four gospels in *Against Heresies*, and other ancient theologians also made partial lists of books, but the earliest full list of the New Testament canon did not appear until 367 in a letter written by Athanasius of Alexandria. Athanasius also included additional non-scriptural works which he said “have been appointed by the Fathers as reading-matter for those who have just come forward and [by] which to be instructed in the doctrine of piety: the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Sirach, Esther, Judith, Tobias, the so-called Teaching [Didache] of the Apostles, and the Shepherd [of Hermas].”

The Apostolic Fathers

Thus we arrive at a body of writings now known as the *Apostolic Fathers*, which includes *The Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* mentioned above by Athanasius. Though the phrase “Apostolic Fathers” was first used by sixth century theologian Severus of Antioch, it did not come into common usage until 1672 with the publication of a selection of these writings. The body of writings known today as the *Apostolic Fathers* includes: *1 and 2 Clement*, the *Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, the *Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians*, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the *Didache*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Epistle to Diognetus*, and the *Fragments of Papias*. All of these writings overlap with the end of the apostolic age and are attested to in the writings of ancient theologians such as Polycarp bishop of Smyrna, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, and others.

In addition, some of these writings are included in the oldest manuscripts of the Bible. For example, the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* are included in *Codex Sinaiticus* (c. 330 – c. 360); and *1 & 2 Clement* are included in *Codex Alexandrinus* (c. 400). Both of these

Bibles, written in Greek, are on display in the British Library in London. Though *Codex Vaticanus* (c. 300 – c. 325, held in the Vatican Library) contains the entire New Testament, it is missing pages, which also may have contained early writings such as those above. In this way, we see how these writings, though not part of the New Testament but carefully preserved, were considered too precious to be allowed to disappear.

Week 1: Clement of Rome and *1 Clement*

Clement (c. 35 - c. 99) is remembered on the ELCA Lutheran Church Calendar on November 23rd, as the third bishop of Rome and for the letter, *1 Clement*, written to the church at Corinth. Just as Paul had written to the Corinthians, Clement also addressed division in the church and the need for love, endurance and harmony, qualities we also strive for today in the church. *1 Clement*, the oldest surviving Christian letter outside of the New Testament, also witnesses to an early understanding of ecclesiastical order, apostolic succession, and how each office in the church works for the good of the whole. In his *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 324 – 325), Eusebius wrote that *1 Clement* was “publically read both in the days of old and in our own time.” Eusebius also stated the tradition that Clement “had seen the blessed apostles, conversed with them and the teaching of the apostles still rang in his ears, their tradition was held before his eyes” (*EH* V.vi). *1 Clement* may no longer be read during worship, yet it still witnesses to the grace every Christian shares by standing in the love of Christ’s body the church.

Excerpt from *1 Clement*:

[44] So too our apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that strife would arise over the office of the bishop. For this reason, since they understood perfectly well in advance what would happen, they appointed those we have already mentioned; and afterwards added a codicil, to the effect that if these should die, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry. Thus we do not think it right to remove from the ministry those who were appointed by them or, afterwards, by other reputable men, with the entire church giving its approval. For they have ministered over the flock of Christ blamelessly and with humility, gently and unselfishly, receiving good witness by all, many times over. Indeed we commit no little sin if we remove from the bishop’s office those who offer the gifts in a blameless and holy way...

[45] You should strive hard, brothers, and be zealous in matters that pertain to salvation! You have gazed into the holy and true scriptures that were given through the Holy Spirit. You realize that there is nothing unjust or counterfeit written in them. There you will not find the upright cast out by men who were holy. The upright were persecuted, but by the lawless. They were imprisoned, but by the unholy. They were stoned by those who transgressed the law and killed by those who embraced vile and unjust envy. And they bore up while suffering these things...

[46] And so, we too must cling to these examples, brothers. For as it is written, “Cling to those who are holy; for those who cling to them will themselves be made holy.” And again, in another place it says, “With an innocent man you too will be innocent and with the one who is chosen, you will be chosen. But with the corrupt you will cause corruption. Therefore, we should cling to those who are innocent and upright, for these are God’s chosen. Why are there conflicts, fits of anger, dissensions, factions, and war among you? Do we not have one God, and one Christ, and one gracious Spirit that has been poured out upon us, and one calling in Christ? Why do we mangle and mutilate the members of Christ and create factions in our own body? Why do we come to such a pitch of madness as to forget that we are members of one another? Remember the word of our Lord Jesus, for he said, “Woe to that person! It would be good for him not to have been born, rather than cause one of my chosen to stumble. Better for him to

have a millstone about his neck and be drowned in the sea than to have corrupted one of my chosen.” Your schism has corrupted many and cast many into despondency, many into doubt, and all of us into grief. And your faction persists even now!

[49] The one who experiences love in Christ should do what Christ commanded. Who can explain the bond of God’s love? Who is able to recount the greatness of its beauty? The height to which love leads is beyond description. Love binds us to God; love hides a multitude of sins [cf. 1 Pet. 4:8]; love bears all things and endures all things. There is nothing vulgar in love, nothing haughty. Love has no schism, love creates no faction, love does all things in harmony. Everyone chosen by God has been perfected in love; apart from love nothing is pleasing to God [cf. 1 Cor. 13:4-7]. The Master has received us in love. Because of the love he had for us, our Lord Jesus Christ gave his blood for us, by God’s will – his flesh for our flesh, his soul for our souls. (Except from *The Apostolic Fathers*. LCL, No. 24, Trans. by Bart D. Ehrman, 2003).

Meditation

Though we are separated from Clement and the church in Corinth by centuries of history, language, culture and discovery, it is not difficult to recognize our shared humanity in the problems the church at Corinth faced. Both Paul and Clement understood the body of the Christ as something we are together, while at the same time being individually members of it. Therefore, divisions in Christ’s body the church also injure and hurt its members.

As human beings, we too, face moments of strife and discord that threaten to pull us away from one another and Christ’s body the church. Though we consider ourselves modern, we also remain in need of the grace and forgiveness that flows from Christ, allowing us to love and forgive as we have been loved and forgiven by Christ. Clement writes, “Love binds us to God,” meaning Christ’s love for us creates the bond we share both with Christ and with one another in the church. We love, care for, and remain committed to one another as his body the church. Across millennia, Clement’s words continue to witness to us in our factious world of today.

There is a certain symmetry to Clement’s words, “Love binds us to God,” with Paul’s words, “*Love never ends*” (1 Cor. 13:6), both written to a divided church at Corinth. When we are bound to God in love, we are bound to the new life Christ has prepared for us. Before he suffered, Jesus gave his disciples a new command, “*love another as I have loved you,*” because Christ knew that love would lead his church through difficulty, offering an unbreakable power of unity with God for the world. For both Paul and Clement the self-sacrificial love of Jesus is the model of Christian life both in the church and in the world.

Clement was also mindful of 1 Peter’s words, “*love covers a multitude of sins.*” Clement was perhaps also thinking of the verse prior to those words, “*The end of all things is at hand; therefore keep sane and sober for your prayers*” (1 Pet. 4:7). These words encourage us to see prayer as the love that binds us to God, keeping us sane and at peace in a badly divided and sinful world. Time with God in prayer binds us to the love of God allowing that love to flow outward from us as prayer leads us into prayerful action for the healing of the world. Amen.

For further reading:

Encyclopedia of Early Christianity. Edited by Everett Ferguson, New York & London: Garland Publishers, second edition, 1999.

The Apostolic Fathers. Loeb Classical Library No. 24 & 25, Translated by Bart D. Ehrman, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003. (There is also an earlier Loeb edition translated by Kirsopp Lake, 1912, 1913).

The Apostolic Fathers. Translated by J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, Edited by Michael W. Holmes, Grand Rapids: Baker, (1891; second edition, 1989), third edition, 2006.