

Northolt Park Baptist Church (22 October 2006) 5 Minutes on the Apostolic Fathers

Church history? Isn't that dull and boring? Why should we bother looking back? One reason is that we need to know the *past* in order to understand the *present*. If we don't know history we're like a person without a memory; history helps us understand ourselves, and it enables us to see how God has worked through his people a long time before we came along. As Christians, we have a long history of people and writings which are an important part of our spiritual legacy, which we can tap into.

We're going to start at the beginning. Or, at least just *after* the beginning, just after the time of the New Testament, just after the last of Jesus' apostles has died. The term 'Apostolic Fathers' has been given to various Christian writings which come from the period immediately following the apostles to about AD 150, whose authors claimed to be continuing the apostles' teaching. These writings give us a fascinating glimpse of the church after the time of the New Testament.

The writings include some letters, some sermons, a church handbook, an account of a martyrdom, a vision, and a defense of the Christian faith. Since this is only a five-minute spot, we're going to look at only three figures...

The first one is Clement...

Clement

Clement was an elder in the church in Rome, and in AD 96 he wrote a letter to the church in Corinth. Some church members in Corinth were rejecting the authority of the eldership, and Clement encouraged them to submit to it. He shows a wide knowledge of the New Testament.

The second one is Ignatius...

Ignatius

Ignatius lived from about AD 35 to 107 and was bishop of Antioch in what is Turkey today. He was arrested for his faith, and sent to Rome for his trial and execution. On the way he was allowed to stay at a number of towns where

Christians ministered to him. He then wrote letters to thank the churches for this help. He also wrote one to the Christians in Rome telling them that he welcomed his martyrdom, and asking them not to try to save him from what he saw as a great honour to die for his Lord.

He was particularly concerned about damaging teachings which said that Jesus wasn't really a human, but only *appeared* to be human; so he urged his readers to be clear about accepting the full humanity of Jesus. He was also concerned for the churches to be united, and he thought the best guarantee for unity was for authority in the local church to be placed in the hands of one bishop. So, he called on the Christians to recognise the authority of their leaders.

And the third one is Polycarp...

Polycarp

As a young lad, Polycarp had listened to the apostle John, so he was a direct link to the apostles. Eventually he became bishop of Smyrna (which is in modern-day Turkey). Ignatius had sent one of his letters to Polycarp. The Philippian church had asked Polycarp for copies of any of Ignatius' letters he had. He sent them a letter in reply. In his letter, he warns against the love of money, which had recently caused the downfall of one of their leaders, and he discusses the duties of elders and deacons and church members. Polycarp himself was eventually martyred. At his trial he was urged to recant in view of his age, but he refused to do so. He is said to have declared: 'Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?'

We have a lot to learn from Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, and others who ministered in the generation after the apostles, who encouraged the church to stay faithful to Christ, who emphasised the importance of appropriate leadership, and who stayed true even in the midst of suffering and death.