

**Lecture 7-Witnesses Unto The Truth: The Early Church Fathers**

*We are like dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants; thanks to them, we see further than they. Busying ourselves with the treatises written by the ancients, we take their choice thoughts, buried by age and human neglect, and we raise them, as it were from death to renewed life.*  
*Peter of Blois [d. 1212]*

*Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.*  
*1 Timothy 4: 16*

**Assigned Reading**

*The Story of Christianity*—chapter 9

**Key Terms**

Church fathers, origen, tertullian

**Objectives**

- Identify the early church fathers
- Explain the importance of the church fathers to us today

**Class Prayer**

*“Lord God, let us keep your Scriptures in mind and meditate on them day and night, persevering in prayer, always on the watch. We beg you, Lord, to give us real knowledge of what we read and to show us not only how to understand it, but how to put it into practice, so that we may...obtain spiritual grace, enlightened by the law of the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord, whose power and glory will endure throughout all ages. Amen.”*

*Origen*

**Witnesses Unto The Truth: The Early Church Fathers****I. About the Church Fathers**

- A. Formidable
- B. Distant in time
- C. Famous
- D. Admired
- E. Alluded to
- F. Not well known

**II. Who Were the Church Fathers?**

- A. Leaders of the Church after the apostles
- B. The traditional division
  1. Ante-Nicene fathers
  2. Nicene fathers
  3. Post-Nicene fathers
- C. Church leaders of the “Hellenized Mediterranean”
- D. Lived the Gospel
- E. Orthodox

**III. Nine Important Fathers**

- A. Clement of Rome (fl. 90-100)
- B. Polycarp (70-155/60)

Polycarp: “Eighty-six years have I served Him and He never did me wrong; how can I now blaspheme my King who has saved me?”

C. Justin Martyr (100-165)

Justin Martyr (his last words to the Roman prefect who put him to death): “We desire nothing more than to suffer for our Lord Jesus Christ; for this gives us salvation and joyfulness before His dreadful judgment seat, at which all the world must appear.”

D. Tatian (110-80)—Asia’s first theologian

1. Scholar (Diatessaron)
2. Ascetic (encratism)

E. Irenaeus (130-200)—missionary bishop (Lyon in Gaul)

1. Against Heresies

Irenaeus: “I am neither practiced in writing nor trained in rhetoric, but my love for you and yours encourages me to bear my witness about these [false] teachings which have been hidden till the present, but have now by the grace of God come to light.”

2. Biblical (Covenant) theology

F. Tertullian (155-225)—first Latin theologian

1. Writings on doctrine

Tertullian: “The Son of God was crucified; I am not ashamed because men must needs be ashamed of it. And the Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And He was buried and rose again; the fact is certain, because it is impossible.”

2. Writings on the Christian Life

Tertullian: “I must sigh for and call after and discourse about that health of patience which I fail to possess.”

“Our Lord Jesus has surnamed himself Truth, not custom.”

G. Clement of Alexandria (150-215)

1. Catechetical school of Alexandria (Pantaenus, Clement, and Origen)
2. “Shepherd of tender youth”

H. Origen (185-254)

1. Contra Celsum
2. Hexapla
3. On first principles

I. Cyprian (200-258)

1. Testimonies

Cyprian: “But after the stain of earlier years had been washed away with the help of the water of new birth; and a light from above, serene and pure, had been poured into my forgiven heart; after a second birth had remade me a new man by means of the Spirit breathed from heaven; then in a wonderful way what had been doubtful became sure, what had been hidden was revealed, what had been dark was lit up, what had seemed difficult before could now be attempted, what had been though impossible was now able to be done.”

2. The role of the bishop

3. Martyrdom

Cyprian: “What an honour, and what security, it is to go gladly from this place, to depart gloriously from amongst oppressions and afflictions—to shut one’s eyes for a moment, with which men and the world are seen, and to open them at once to see God and Christ” (An exhortation to martyrdom).

IV. How Should We View the Fathers?

- A. Extreme \_\_\_\_\_ (Roman Catholicism and especially Eastern Orthodoxy)

B. Undue \_\_\_\_\_ (Protestantism, except the Anglican Church)

C. Proper appreciation

Prayer of Origen: “O Jesus, my feet are dirty. Come even as a slave to me, pour water into your bowl, come and wash my feet... Wash my feet, because I long for your companionship.”

1. Sinful human beings who were
2. Sometimes wrong,
3. But (often) faithful guides.

“What can we say of the Fathers? What shall we think of them, or what account may we make of them? They be interpreters of the Word of God. They were learned men, and learned Fathers, the instruments of the mercy of God, and vessels full of grace. We despise them not, we read them, we reverence them, and give thanks unto God for them. They were witnesses unto the truth, they were worthy pillars and ornaments in the church of God. Yet may they not be compared with the Word of God. We may not build upon them; we may not put our trust in them. Our trust is in the name of the Lord” (Bishop John Jewel, quoted by Philip E. Hughes in *Theology of the English Reformers*, p. 30)

### For Further Study

The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture Project

Under the general editorship of Thomas Oden, InterVarsity Press is bringing out a 27-volume series of commentaries written from the first century of Christian history to 750. These books should help many Christians to recover an important part of their heritage.

Read the short excerpt from the earliest known sermon outside the New Testament. It is called Second Clement, although it is now believed to not be from Clement of Rome (“Let Us Repent Immediately”). What is the author’s view of Christ? How, according to this writing, is a person to be saved? What is missing? Why?