

The Torch Bearers

Last time we saw how in the decades after Jesus and the Apostles the message of the Gospel was threatened by various false teachings and straying sects within the church. While the books of the New Testament had not yet been fully gathered together, who would defend the truth of the Lord's message? Well, God continued to guide the spread of the church through the Holy Spirit in the lives of two groups of men—those who had personally known the Apostles and the later Apologists. Today, these ancient brothers are often called The Church Fathers.

While Jesus lived, He was the sole authority of God's Kingdom on earth, as the Father spoke directly through Him. After Jesus, the Apostles carried on by inspiration of the Holy Spirit to teach and lead the Lord's people. But, what about when the Apostles died and the New Testament still wasn't completely compiled? Well, God was still at work. We believe that the Holy Spirit still worked in a prophetic way through the preachers of truth, especially those upon whom the Apostles had laid hands.

As the early 100s AD progressed, the brothers who had personally known the Apostles continued to lead the church. Men like Papias, who had known the Apostle John and Philip's four prophesying daughters. Papias is the one who says that Mark's Gospel contains the preaching message of Peter.

Another leader was Polycarp, who was a student of John and an elder at Smyrna. He wrote a now well-known letter to the church at Philippi. His writings are saturated with the language of the New Testament books. This is the man, who when put to the stake for refusing to deny Christ, said, *"I have served Him for 86 years, and He never did me any wrong: how can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"*

A third brother was Clement of Rome, who was an elder at Rome. He knew many of the Apostles and may have actually been the man referred to by name in Philippians 4:3. He would write in AD 96 to the church at Corinth and mention that the Roman church was beginning to gather together the books of the New Testament.

After all the brothers who knew the Apostles died, another group of men fought against the false teachings and accusations against the Christians that were so prevalent. These Apologists defended the truths of Christian doctrine and moral conduct.

Two very well-known Apologists from the mid-late 100s are Justin Martyr and Tertullian. Justin was a Christian philosopher, who wrote a defense of Christianity to Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Justin was beheaded in Rome for his faith in AD 165. Tertullian was a lawyer in Rome who became a Christian. He defended the Christian Church in a time of great persecution and is credited with saying, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Other well-known names of great Christian teachers from this era include: Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus. God used these brothers, among others, to help guide the church through a vicious assault by the Romans in the 100-200s. Most of them died as martyrs or "witnesses" for Christ.

In the 1700s, a man named Dalrymple, exhaustively read the writings of these men and counted all but eleven verses of the New Testament in their writings and sermons. God was determined not to allow the Romans to destroy the Gospel, in spite of their efforts to do so.

One last point—a very important point! The stories of the Apostles and the Church Fathers are just the first in a long ongoing list of faithful servants of the Lord who have joined Jesus in suffering death for the cause of the Faith. It truly is "the blood of the martyrs" that has grown the church and given it to us today. We must never forget their self-sacrifice.

But, it all continues today as the people of God are persecuted and killed for their faith around the world still. In China, SE Asia, India, Africa, and the Middle East, the persecution against God's people is still widespread and murderous even this morning.

Let us pray, not only for our brothers and sisters, but for those lost in the lies of Satan who do such things against God and His people! And let us "pour out our lives" for the sake of the Gospel!

Scott