

Strangers and Pilgrims: Reading the Apostolic Fathers

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Course Description

Christian theologians throughout history have looked to the earliest writings of the Church for a vision of Christianity nourished by the apostolic teachings and untainted by later corruptions. Indeed, Thomas Aquinas once claimed that those theologians closest to Christ's first coming were best educated in the mysteries of our faith. Even if this is not the case, what is true is that the *Apostolic Fathers*, those Christian ministers and theologians directly tied to the Apostles themselves, provide a fascinating window into early Christian belief and practice.

In this course, we will carefully read and discuss these writings: 1 & Clement, the Letters of Ignatius and Polycarp, the Martyrdom of Polycarp, the Didache, the Epistles of Barnabas and Diognetus, and the Shepherd of Hermas. Students will learn to critically assess what we can and cannot conclude about the nature of the early Church and apostolic teaching from these writings, and to glean their distinctive theological insights within the turbulent context of early Christianity.

Course Format

The format of the course will be predominantly one of guided discussion. The instructor will often be doing most of the talking, but generally to illuminate and draw out themes from the text for discussion, rather than in straight-up lectures. Thus, students will be expected to come having read and engaged with the text selection for the week, and with thoughts prepared to contribute.

Classes will meet via Zoom for two hours each week and will be recorded for later viewing by students who cannot participate. Additional student participation and instructor interaction can take place on a private discussion board.

Course Objectives

Objectives for this course include: (1) to discuss the historical background to these early Christian writings (2) to appreciate the theological contours and development among these early Christian authors (3) to explore worship practices in the early church (4) to better understand how the church related to broader societal and political struggles (5) to examine patristic ecclesiology (6) to remark on the various pastoral and moral concerns addressed in the pastoral writings.

Course Requirements

1. Weekly readings (due before our meeting each week).
2. Weekly interaction with fellow participants and the instructor in live class sessions.

Additional Course Requirements for Course Credit:

1. Weekly (10) 1-page, typed, in 12-point Times New Roman font, reflections which engage with the assigned readings for that day. These may range from a simple digest of the material to an engagement with and reflection upon a single aspect of the reading.
2. One (1) 12–15 page essay exploring a topic approved by the instructor.

Course Text

The Apostolic Fathers, Volume I: I Clement. II Clement. Ignatius. Polycarp. Didache. Edited and translated by Bart D. Ehrman. Loeb Classical Library 24. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003. [AF:1]

The Apostolic Fathers, Volume II: Epistle of Barnabas. Papias and Quadratus. Epistle to Diognetus. The Shepherd of Hermas. Edited and translated by Bart D. Ehrman. Loeb Classical Library 25. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003. [AF:2]

[You may use the 3rd edition of Michael Holmes’s *Apostolic Fathers* (Greek-English) if you already own it. Still, I highly recommend the Loeb edition.]

Course Schedule

Week	Dates	Discussion Topics	Reading
1	TBD	1 & 2 Clement	AF:1, pgs. 18–199
2	TBD	Letters of Ignatius	AF:1, pgs. 203–321
3	TBD	Polycarp’s Letter to the Philippians and Martyrdom of Polycarp	AF:1, pgs. 324–401
4	TBD	Didache	AF:1, pgs. 405–443

5	TBD	Epistle of Barnabas	AF:2, pgs. 3–91
6	TBD	Epistle to Diognetus	AF:2, pgs. 122–159
7	TBD	Shepherd of Hermas 1	AF:2, pgs. 162–237
8	TBD	Shepherd of Hermas 2	AF:2, pgs. 237–305
9	TBD	Shepherd of Hermas 3	AF:2, pgs. 305–385
10	TBD	Shepherd of Hermas 4	AF:2, pgs. 386–473