

Introductory Notice

[a.d. 100-200.] The Apostolic Fathers are here understood as filling up the second century of our era. Irenaeus, it is true, is rather of the sub-apostolic period; but, as the disciple of Polycarp, he ought not to be dissociated from that Father's company. We thus find ourselves conducted, by this goodly fellowship of witnesses, from the times of the apostles to those of Tertullian, from the martyrs of the second persecution to those of the sixth. Those were times of heroism, not of words; an age, not of writers, but of soldiers; not of talkers, but of sufferers. Curiosity is baffled, but faith and love are fed by these scanty relics of primitive antiquity. Yet may we well be grateful for what we have. These writings come down to us as the earliest response of converted nations to the testimony of Jesus. They are primary evidences of the Canon and the credibility of the New Testament. Disappointment may be the first emotion of the student who comes down from the mount where he has dwelt in the tabernacles of evangelists and apostles: for these disciples are confessedly inferior to the masters; they speak with the voices of infirm and fallible men, and not like the New Testament writers, with the fiery tongues of the Holy Ghost. Yet the thoughtful and loving spirit soon learns their exceeding value. For who does not close the records of St. Luke with longing; to get at least a glimpse of the further history of the progress of the Gospel? What of the Church when its founders were fallen asleep? Was the Good Shepherd "always" with His little flock, according to His promise? Was the Blessed Comforter felt in His presence amid the fires of persecution? Was the Spirit of Truth really able to guide the faithful into all truth, and to keep them in the truth?

And what had become of the disciples who were the first-fruits of the apostolic ministry? St. Paul had said, "The same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be *able to teach others also*." How was this injunction realized? St. Peter's touching words come to mind, "I will endeavour that ye may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance." Was this endeavour successfully carried out? To these natural and pious inquiries, the Apostolic Fathers, though we have a few specimens only of their fidelity, give an emphatic reply. If the cold-hearted and critical find no charm in the simple, childlike faith which they exhibit, ennobled though it be by heroic devotion to the Master, we need not marvel. Such would probably object: "They teach me nothing; I do not relish their multiplied citations from Scripture." The answer is, "If you are familiar with Scripture, you owe it largely to these primitive witnesses to its Canon and its spirit. By their testimony we detect what is spurious, and we identify what is real. Is it nothing to find that your Bible is their Bible, your faith their faith, your Saviour their Saviour, your God their God?" Let us reflect also, that, when copies of the entire Scriptures were rare and costly, these citations were "words fitly spoken,-apples of gold in pictures of silver." We are taught by them also that they obeyed the apostles precept, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing," etc. Thus they reflect the apostolic care that men should be raised up able to teach others also.

Their very mistakes enable us to attach a higher value to the superiority of inspired writers. They were not wiser than the naturalists of their day who taught them the history of the Phoenix and other fables; but nothing of this sort is found in Scripture. The Fathers

are inferior in kind as well as in degree; yet their words are lingering echoes of those whose words were spoken "as the Spirit gave them utterance." They are monuments of the power of the Gospel. They were made out of such material as St. Paul describes when he says, "Such were some of you." But for Christ, they would have been worshippers of personified Lust and Hate, and of every crime. They would have lived for "bread and circus-shows." Yet to the contemporaries of a Juvenal they taught the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount. Among such beasts in human form they reared the sacred home; they created the Christian family; they gave new and holy meanings to the names of wife and mother; they imparted ideas unknown before of the dignity of man as man; they infused an atmosphere of benevolence and love; they bestowed the elements of liberty chastened by law; they sanctified human society by proclaiming the universal brotherhood of redeemed man. As we read the Apostolic Fathers, we comprehend, in short, the meaning of St. Paul when he said prophetically, what men were slow to believe, "The foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.... But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are."

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