

Apostolic Fathers: Key Issues and Their Understanding of Grace

Introduction

Immediately after the Apostles faded from the scene in the first century their letters were the only things left for earlier church leaders (better known as “Church Fathers”) to follow.¹ Thus, “Signs of an emerging normative Christianity and indications that the vacuum left by the death of the apostles would not remain empty for long may be seen in the subsequent developments regarding written sources of authority and in church structure.”² Hence, not only does one find proliferate apostolic regurgitation in the writings of the Church Fathers but the establishment of what would soon be the emerging order for many centuries to come known as the Christian Church.

Many issues could be discussed in relation to this topic. However, the scope here is much more limited to how certain key issues evolved in the early church leading to the Apostolic Father’s understanding of grace. First, this article will reflect on the certain views of the early Church Fathers in relations to early structure, perspective on persecution and martyrdom, use of Scripture, tradition, church and state, war on heresies, apostolic background and post-apostolic Christianity (as developed in the work by J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer). The second part of this article will develop key observations and comments of the books by Thomas F. Torrance and John Lawson and their description of the Church Fathers’ view of grace and salvation, and conclude with a modest proposal.

¹ John Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 3, Lawson goes on to suggest how the apostolic writings did not immediately attain canonical status or looked upon as Scripture: “Thus the Apostles sought to make up for their absence by their letters. Later on death took away from the Church the original witnesses to the facts about Christ. The Church then had perforce to fall back upon the precious written testimony of the Apostles. That the ‘memoirs of the Apostles,’ as S. Justin so fittingly calls them (*I Apology*, lxvi), were at first looked upon only as a substitute for the personal presence and word of an Apostle does not involve that they in any way lacked spiritual authority. The Christian authority was the Apostolic principle, and the ‘memoirs’ were the Apostolic principle in written form. Nevertheless, they were not at first looked upon at ‘Scripture,’ in the same sense as the ancient Jewish Scripture inherited by the Church. Their authority lay not in the fact that they were enshrined in a sacred Canon, but that they went back reliably to a certain circle of authoritative witnesses.” True. Apostolic writings did not immediately attain canonical status, as far as having a complete compilation of all of the books that were understood as divinely inspired. However, it seems that as early as 2 Peter 3:16 was written, Peter understood Paul’s writings to be at par with “the rest of the Scriptures.” This writer is aware of the problems surrounding the canonical status and date of the epistle of 2 Peter. Thus it seems that on this point Lawson may have overstated the case.

² J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, eds. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd ed., ed. and rev. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 8.

PART I

Early Church Structure

The Scripture shows that early in the Church—e.g., in Acts 14–15 as well as in many General (e.g., Galatians) and Pastoral Epistles—many issues needed resolution. As soon as problems arose a permanent structure was needed. The Apostles were there on the scene, either in person or by letter to remedy the problems. However, after the first century and the Apostles passing from the scene more problems arose in the second century that was even more severe. As the church was growing, changes from within and out threatened to extinguish the work and foundation earlier pioneers laid. Hence second century Church Fathers saw fit to begin to lay an early church structure.

Early church structure began to be implemented that perhaps was not identical to what Paul may have indicated. For example, while Paul's structure to supervise the church was built on a twofold office system of elders and deacons (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3), one finds Ignatius implementing a threefold office structure consisting of a "bishop," as God's sole representative, and under him "elders" and "deacons" (see Ignatius *the letter to the Ephesians* 1-2; *the letter to the Philadelphia* 4).³ This is an early catholic move that restructured the entire church government. Where the bishop appears, that is where the church is. Thus the bishop is who constitutes the church since he is the sole representative of God.⁴ Such a bishop was to be "feared" (i.e. reverence) and viewed as being like "the Lord himself" (Ignatius *the letter to the Ephesians* 6). 1 Clements 1 and 54 outlines — similar to 1 Timothy 3:1-12 and Titus 1:5-10—what ecclesiastical officer characteristics should look like.

Furthermore, Eucharist theology of the Roman Catholic order necessary to attain eternal life seems to have been instituted as early as Ignatius indicates in *the letter to the Ephesians* 20: "...obey the bishop and the presbytery with an undisturbed mind, breaking one bread, which is the medicine of immortality, the antidote we take in order not to die but to live forever in Jesus Christ" (see also Ignatius *the letter to the Romans* 7; Ignatius *the letter to the Philadelphia* 4). Furthermore any Eucharistic and baptismal practices could not be held in the absence of the bishop. Thus, "a move here toward the structure in which the bishop at least partially fills the vacuum left by the apostles" is further met by the claim "that these bishops and their predecessors could be traced back in an unbroken chain to the apostles themselves apparently represent later after-the-fact efforts to justify the new development in church organization that these monarchical bishops represent."⁵

³ Ibid., 9, 80. Ignatius says: "Whereas most Pauline churches were supervised by a twofold structure consisting of elders/overseers ('bishops') and deacons, we find in the Ignatian churches a threefold structure consisting of one bishop under whom served elders and deacons."

⁴ Ibid., 80-81.

⁵ Ibid., 9, 81.

An inception of Episcopalian structure may be located as earlier as Ignatius letter to the *Magnesians* 7 that teaches one cannot operate outside of the ecclesiastical offices of “bishops and presbyters.” However, unlike apostolic authors of the New Testament (NT), these bishops do not claim their authority since they have no power to command people, as Ignatius says: “as though I were somebody important” (Ignatius *the letter to the Ephesians* 3; see also *letter to the Romans* 4:3). Yet, honor, no doubt, is due to those who preach the word as if he were the Lord himself (*The Didache* 4). Out of all the early Church Fathers’ documents the *Didache* became the most influential of all books. The *Didache* makes a strong appeal to teach the Gentile Christians stemming from the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:19-20. The *Didache* prohibits one from partaking of the Eucharist before being baptized (*The Didache* 9:5). Thus, it goes on to illustrate this through a passage that may apply to unbelievers not *unbaptized believers*⁶: “Do not give what is holy to dogs” (Matt 7:6). It is clear from numerous passages that the Church Fathers believed in baptismal regeneration as 2 *Clement* 6:9 states.⁷ A further reference is made to the office of apostle and prophets during this time in *Didache* 11:3. He seems to also see a difference like Ignatius threefold office structure of bishop, presbyter and deacon. The *Didache* also mentions for the first time another form of baptism that is *not* immersion, but instead it is to be done by pouring “water on the head three times ‘in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’” (*The Didache* 7:3).

Out of all of the writings of the Church Fathers two stand out: *the letter of Ignatius* and the *Didache*. Ignatius, while on the way to martyrdom in Rome, wrote his letters to indoctrinate (to oppose heresies), to deal with issues of how to view correctly the ecclesiastical office and officers and how to function within the church. This was also one of the main purposes for writing the *Didache*.

Perspective on Persecution and Martyrdom

Early on from the first and second century, according to the writings of Ignatius and Polycarp that were martyrs (Ignatius *the letter to the Ephesians* 21), the church was undergoing severe persecution. Some have criticized the “macabre eagerness” by which these men submitted and perhaps urged to be martyred (see Ignatius *the letter to the Romans* 2).⁸ In Ignatius *the letter to the Romans* 4, one may understand why people have criticized this type of willingness to die: “I am writing to the churches and am insisting to everyone that I die for God of my own free will—unless you hinder me. I implore you: do not be ‘unseasonably kind’ to me. Let me be food for the wild beasts, through whom I can reach God. I am wheat, and I am being ground by teeth of the

⁶ This writer is aware that belief and baptism in Christ were usually practiced in succession, perhaps unlike today. Therefore, this *Didache* passage may not be teaching baptismal regeneration, but was seeing it so closely intertwined that to be un-baptized equated unbelief.

⁷ Here it is said: “Now if even such righteous men as these are not able, by means of their own righteous deeds, to save their children, what assurance do we have of entering the kingdom of God if we fail to keep our baptism pure and undefiled? Or who will be our advocate, if we are not found to have holy and righteous works?” See also *Ignatius to Polycarp* 6; *Barnabas* 11:1.

⁸ Lightfoot and Harmer, eds., *Apostolic Fathers*, 29.

wild beasts, that I may prove to be pure bread” (see also 4:5-6). Perhaps criticizing these Fathers is unwarranted and misunderstands the perspective on martyrdom of the Church Fathers. For example, Ignatius understood that to imitate the Lord (*the letter to the Romans* 6) by dying as a martyr was a privilege (Ignatius *the letter to the Magnesians* 1) and a sure sign of true discipleship. Hence Ignatius says, “Better yet, coax the wild beasts, that they may become my tomb . . . Then I will truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ, when the world will no longer see my body” (*the letter to the Romans* 4:2).

To die as a martyr according to Ignatius was to be near to God. Thus, this signifies “‘near the sword’ means ‘near to God;’ ‘with the beasts’ means ‘with God’” (*the letter to the Smyrnaeans* 4:2).⁹ Along with Ignatius, in the face of pure hostility Polycarp’s faithfulness and courage in martyrdom was something that seems all believers would follow in the coming centuries. As Polycarp was asked to denounce Christ in front of a whole crowd, he replied: “‘For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?’” (*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9:3). Out of this type of eagerness for martyrdom perhaps arose a type of “martyrdom theology” by the second century that all Christians could relate and be characterized.

Apostolic Father’s Use of Scripture

By the time of the Church Fathers, the Scriptures (not being formally defined yet) were accepted as authoritative and binding, although these writings were not yet formally canonized. Far too many to quote here, 1 Clement quotes from and alludes unsparingly to many NT and OT passages. 1 Clement 13:2 expresses the sayings of Jesus (from Matt 5:7; 6:14; 7:1-2; Luke 6:31, 36-38), but it differs in wording and details (see also 46:8). Hence perhaps Clement was dependent on a different source or manuscript, either oral or written. One can see how this is “certainly possible.”¹⁰ However, Lightfoot acknowledges: “‘As Clement’s quotations are often very loose, we need not go beyond the Canonical Gospels for the source of this passage.’”¹¹

Many quotations from numerous Church Fathers clearly reveal that they had access to OT Scriptures as well as many Pauline and general epistles. Ignatius expresses inheriting the kingdom of God concept in *the letter to the Ephesians* 16. He also alludes to Paul’s comment of the cross in 1 Corinthians 1:20 being a stumbling block for unbelievers but eternal life for believers in *the letter to the Ephesians* 18. Ignatius communicates to immature believers of *Trallians* similarly to Paul’s expression in 1 Corinthians 3 (*the letter to the Trallians* 5).

⁹ Eaten by beast was one way of being martyred but being burned (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 13-15), being forced to lie on sharp shells and many other ways was also used (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 2:4). See also the *letter to the Smyrnaeans* 4, where “fire,” “sword” and “beasts” are mentioned as having been the cause of many martyrs.

¹⁰ Lightfoot and Harmer, eds., *Apostolic Fathers*, 35, fn 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Polycarp in the *Letter to the Philippians* 2-4 intertwined, as a pearl necklace, Scripture from Matthew, Luke Acts, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and 1 Timothy to argue in polemical fashion the advantage and need to live holily. He virtually covers all areas of Christian living. No doubt, the Church Fathers (including the *Didache* which mentions the Lord's prayer of Matt 6) had a good mastery of the OT and NT Scriptures. However, whether they interpret the Scripture correctly that is another issue.

Church Fathers and Tradition

Many of the traditions that are followed in the Roman Catholic Church were in germ found in the Church Fathers. It has been said, "Tradition also identifies him [Clement] as the bishop of Rome after Peter, but this is unlikely because the office of monarchical bishop, in the sense intended by this later tradition, does not appear to have existed in Rome at this time."¹² Although anachronism may plague interpreters, one should not discount the importance of how the Church Fathers viewed tradition. Hence Clements says: "Therefore let us abandon empty and futile thoughts, and let us conform to the glorious and *holy rule of our tradition*" (*Letter of the Romans to the Corinthians* 7:2; italics added for emphasis). In this whole letter, Clements comes out as being a strong advocate of following the traditions of the pioneers of the faith, which ironically these pioneers which he probably meant to be the apostles and NT prophets would have been surprised at seeing how much of what they said was interpreted by their immediate successors found at least in the printed pages of history.

Church and State

The Christians of the first century (A.D. 64-70) were accused of having started the fire in Rome in A.D. 64, which Nero was rumored to have really started. Thus, the Christian Church of the first and second century (A.D. 70-160) came under heavy persecution since then.

Nevertheless, because of the high standard held by Scripture to obey the government believers found Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 unprecedented in teaching on issues related to church and state. None of the martyrs like Polycarp or Ignatius resisted arrest, disobeyed the authorities or deny God (see *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 2:4). Even at one point when the proconsul suggested that Polycarp persuade the crowd that wanted him dead, he answered: "You I might have considered worthy of a reply, for we have been taught to pay proper respect to rulers and authorities appointed by God, as long as it does us no harm" (*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 10:2).

War on Heresies

Fighting heresies was one of the main reasons the Church Fathers wrote many letters. Ignatius in the *letter to the Ephesians* 6:2 expresses his joy how Onesimus reports that the church lives "in accordance with the truth and that no heresy has found a home

¹² Ibid., 24.

among you.” Again, Ignatius warns (in the *letter to the Philadelphia* 2) that as “children of the light of truth flee from divisions and false teaching.”

Various forms of heresies were identified as existing. For example, Judaizers were spreading in the church as early as Paul wrote Galatians, and it did not cease in the second century. Hence Ignatius says: “But if anyone expounds Judaism to you, do not listen to him. For it is better to hear about Christianity from a man who is circumcised than about Judaism from one who is not. But if either of them fail to speak about Jesus Christ, I look on them as tombstones and graves of the dead, upon which only the names of men are inscribed” (*letter to the Philadelphia* 6:1).

A further heresy expounded as early as John’s epistles relates to Docetism. Ignatius provides the meaning of the term in the *letter to the Trallians* 10:1 and *letter to the Smyrnaeans* 2:1, where he identifies Christ as having “truly suffered” and as being “truly raised, not in ‘appearance only.’” Thus Christ was “in the flesh even after the resurrection” (*letter to the Smyrnaeans* 3). The *letter of Polycarp to the Philippians* 7 picks up on this same theme to combat Docetism. Perhaps Ignatius’ greetings to the bishop of the church of Smyrna (12:2) that mentions the “flesh and blood” in relations to “his suffering and resurrection (which was both physical and spiritual)” refers to the war against Docetism.

It seems 2 Clements may also be arguing against Gnosticism (see also *the letter of Polycarp to the Philippians* introduction). This is not to exclude other heresies that were also in the forefront, like Judaism in the church and Docetism. Since Marcion did not accept all of the common NT documents accepted by the Church fathers, hence Polycarp may refer to him as the “first born of Satan” (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 22:2).

Apostolic Background

Apart from the book of Acts, little is known about the endeavors of the Apostles. In the *fragments of Papias* one learns through Irenaeus that John survived until the time of Trajan. Much information came down to Papias from tradition. Such as, “That Philip the Apostle resided in Hierapolis with his daughters . . .” (*fragments of Papias* 8-9)¹³ 1 Clement indicates Paul was arrested seven times, exiled and stoned. There is also a mention of Matthew having composed an inspired account of the Lord in Hebrew (*fragments of Papias* 3:16), although manuscript evidence is lacking. Papias also mentions that James and John were killed by the Jews, as well as Philip’s drinking of a snake’s poison yet without harm. There were those who were raised from the dead that “survived until the time of Hadrian” (*fragments of Papias* 5). Peter and Paul were killed in the Neronian persecutions. Paul taught the Word to the “farthest limits of the west” (*letter of the Romans to the Corinthians* 5).

Post-apostolic Christianity

Post-apostolic Christianity developed numerous things. 1 Enoch and *The Shepherd of Hermas* develop similar parallel parables. Hence both may contain

¹³ Ibid., 315.

apocalyptic genre. After the Apostles faded from the scene, the Fathers continued to fight schisms (see *letter to the Magnesians* 6). Also, Christians were not keeping the Sabbath but “the Lord’s day” (which is Sunday) “which our life also arose through him and his death” (*Magnesians* 9; see also *letter to the Ephesians* 9). The OT is affirmed as “sacred Scriptures” in 1 Clement 53. The Epistle of Barnabas takes an allegorical interpretive method, as well as an interpretive approach closely linked to Judaism that was not followed by the later church. In the *letter to the Smyrnaeans* 6 Ignatius seems to believe angels can be saved if they “believe in the blood of Christ.”

PART II

Thomas F. Torrance’s View of Grace & the Apostolic Fathers¹⁴

Thomas F. Torrance’s main thesis of his book is the following: the Church Father’s moved away from the predominant emphasis of grace in NT thought to a primary emphasis of “absolute precedence [of what they believed] was God’s call to a new life in obedience to revealed truth.”¹⁵ He sees two major factors that contributed to such a radical change. First, in spite of the Pauline influence of grace in his Romans epistle, the church was influenced by Judaism’s insistence of the law. Thus striving for justification by works played a predominant role in diminishing grace. This became dominantly taught in two books: the *letter of Barnabas* and *Didache*. Hence the early Church Father’s predominant teachings veered away from the central function of Christ’s grace accomplished at the cross to a remedy of repentance toward God. The second major influencing factor the church fell prey to be was that of Hellenistic thought. This was a naturalistic approach. According to Torrance, the Church Fathers were not opposed to the issue of grace as much as they were misguided in their understanding of grace. Thus it resulted in their failure to grasp the *significance of the death of Christ*.¹⁶ Hence they concentrated not on what Christ accomplished once-and-for-all, but on the new way Christ showed them how to live. Christianity as a result became a set of rules.¹⁷

Torrance documents how the common belief in the Apostolic Father’s writings is how those who endured to the end obtained salvation.¹⁸ Furthermore 1 Clements speaks of “faith in Christ,”¹⁹ but Torrance clarifies that “there is no doubt that faith pertains ‘not

¹⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1959).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Italics are original.

¹⁷ See Ignatius *letter to the Philadelphians* 3; *letter to the Smyrnaeans* 6:2; 2 Clement 4; *The Shepherd of Hermas* 3:4, mandate 3:28; 4:31.7; 9:39.6-7; parable 5:60.3.

¹⁸ Torrance, *Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers*, 39; see *Didache* 16:2.

¹⁹ *1 Clements* 20:11-12; 22:1; 32:2; 50:7; see Torrance, *Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers*, 46.

so much to the person of Christ as to Christ's precepts' or 'an opportunity for repentance.'"²⁰ Thus, the justifying once-and-for-all-work of the atonement was understood as a "subjective and ethical turn."²¹ Torrance validates this point numerous times and states, "Clement can say we are 'justified by works, not by words' and insist that we are not justified by faith alone.... Thus consistent with this view of the Christian was as essentially a way of self-abnegation and humility, faith can only bring justification when by its very exercise it manifests this quality of abasement before God."²² Torrance also documents from the letter of Ignatius to the Phil 8:2 how he hopes to be justified through the prayers of the saints, unlike the once-and-for-all justification by faith taught by Paul in Romans 3:21–4:25. Though Ignatius believes in some way of the vicarious atonement of Christ for the unbeliever,²³ Torrance correctly concludes, "At the same time it must be noted that apparently the death of Christ is not brought into relation with forgiveness. Forgiveness he does speak of but probably not on the ground of Christ's death. On what ground then is forgiveness granted? It is given to the repentant on the ground of faith and love."²⁴ Thus, for Ignatius, as the other Church Fathers, justification was a matter of a process that was not independent of man.²⁵ Noting this, Torrance concludes: "The Person of Christ, His cross, death and resurrection, form the character of salvation. But in spite of this the believer on earth is not 'perfect' [Phil 5:1; 8:2] so far as his salvation is concerned, that is, not safe."²⁶ There are numerous more citations from the Church Fathers (e.g., Polycarp, Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas) that clearly shows how they did not believe in the Pauline once-and-for-all justification concept by faith alone in Christ alone, but instead in a works oriented concept based on perseverance in faithfulness to the end of one's life in order to attain final justification.²⁷

Three major shifts occurred: (1) Grace became a continual striving after life instead of a motivating factor that encompasses the entire Christian life.²⁸ (2) The second shift of grace occurred when it lost its eschatological character and became a powerful aid within believers that enable them to live holily. It was viewed as a "*Pneumatic*" power brought by the Holy Spirit as a "gift of spiritual energy." Thus it became "a phenomenon, a pneumatic energy implanted in the soul."²⁹ (3) Finally, the church

²⁰ Ibid. See *1 Clements* 8:1, 5; 50:3.

²¹ Ibid., 46-47.

²² Ibid., 49; see *1 Clements* 1:2; 11:1; 15:1-2; 21:8; 32:4; 50:5; 60:4.

²³ The Letters Ignatius *to the Smyrnaeans* 6:1; *Ephesians* 11:1; 16:2 *Philadelphians* 5:1; *Trallians* 2:1; 3.

²⁴ Ibid., 63; see Ignatius *letter to the Philadelphians* 8:1.

²⁵ See *Eph* 13:2; 19:3; *Trall* 9:1.

²⁶ Torrance, *Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers*, 67. See *Trall* 13:3; *Eph* 3:1.

²⁷ See *ibid.*, 90-111 for a detail analysis of these early church leaders.

²⁸ Ibid., 139.

²⁹ Ibid., 140.

monopolized grace. That is, “The Church as the body of Christ was looked on as the depository of pneumatic grace, which might be dispensed in sacramentalist fashion after the analogy of the mystery religions.”³⁰

John Lawson’s View of the Apostolic Fathers³¹

John Lawson acknowledges that the Apostolic Fathers were successors of apostolic truth. However, Lawson is incorrect in saying that NT writers were “more inspired” than the Church Fathers, as if the Apostolic successors were minimally inspired. The Apostles were inspired and the Church Fathers were absolutely not. Perhaps Lawson does not mean that,³² but the way it is stated that seems to be the case.

Thus, unlike Torrance’s position on grace, Lawson believes the Apostolic Fathers’ main concern was characteristically addressing the areas of church discipline and organization. Therefore, he thinks for this reason one cannot judge the works of the Fathers “of less spiritual value to the Christian religion.”³³ Lawson is much more positive of the Church Father than Torrance since he understands the Fathers to be only addressing one side of the issue, which can be summed up in two words discipleship and organization. Hence he does not believe the early church deviated from the doctrine of grace taught by Jesus and Paul. Instead, Lawson believes many contemporary theologians, like Torrance, are guilty of being “theological anachronistic” by imposing later developed salvation phraseology of the Reformation (as well as twenty-first century) to the Church Fathers, thus requiring that they express themselves in such a way. Although the Fathers are not constantly referring to grace, in various passages they seem to give hints of salvation as being without merit. For example, 1 Clement 32:4 records: “And so we, having been called through his will in Christ Jesus, are not justified through ourselves or through our own wisdom or understanding or piety or works which we have done in holiness of hearts, but through faith, by which the almighty Justified all who have existed from the beginning.” *The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians* 1:3 states that by believing in Christ we “‘by grace you have been saved, not because of works,’ but by the will of God through Jesus Christ.” Having shown this, however, Lawson’s objection to Torrance’s accusation does not debunk the well-documented evidence in Torrance’s doctoral dissertation that clearly shows how the apostolic Church Fathers deviated from the free-grace doctrine taught by Jesus and the Apostles. The best one could say on Lawson’s behalf and *some* of the Church Fathers (as seen by the quotes above) is that

³⁰ Ibid., 141.

³¹ John Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961).

³² This writer acknowledges this because of what Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Intro. to the Apostolic Fathers*, 6, says: “There is, then, an important discontinuity between the temporary office of the Christian Apostle and the permanent office of the Christian teacher. Answering to this is the discontinuity between the canonical ‘Apostolic writings’ and the noncanonical ‘Apostolic Fathers.’”

³³ Ibid., 2.

they may have understood salvation as a free gift of God found solely by faith in Christ but were later confused and corrupted the salvation-by-grace message by mingling it with works.

Conclusion: A Modest Proposal to the Torrance and Lawson Interpretation of the Church Fathers

Clearly enough evidence exists to agree with both sides. Torrance can easily point to sections that use the taking of the Eucharist for eternal life as a means of mechanicalizing grace (see footnote 16 for passages supporting Torrance's position). However, Lawson is also correct in understanding that the Fathers' writing only emphasizes one side and may give an incomplete picture of their convictions about grace. The issue, however, of "faith alone" is not something unique to the Reformation period (although it became the period that highly stressed it) since the NT Gospels and the epistles clearly refer to it. Hence it is unfair to suggest that one commits theological anachronism if the lack of grace theology is absent in stressing the clear distinction between justification and sanctification, which seems to be the case in many of the Apostolic Fathers' writings.

The Church Fathers' unmatched devotion and commitment to following Christ, concern for growth and protection of the church, seems to be the *Sitz im Leben* in which they wrote. Thus some may say it would be unfair to impose one's theological grid where, perhaps even if correct, they did not express themselves by using such terms as *faith alone in Christ alone*. Yet, the NT is clear in its teaching and its usage of grace terminology in justification (cf. John 3:16; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 11:25-27; 20:31; Rom 3:21–4:25; Gal 2:16-17; 3; 5:4) and in sanctification (cf. John 15; Rom 6–8; Gal 4-6), which leaves the Fathers without excuse by not incorporating more often God's free-grace offer as a dominant thrust in justification as well as distinguishing it from sanctification. For, examples, as shown above, clearly confuse the salvation-by-grace message of Scripture.

It seems the Church Fathers knew of grace and followed it at times, but were *confused of how it all fit together in justification and sanctification*. Therein lies the solution. Therefore, at times they seemed very legalistic, when in fact they fought tooth and nail against the legalism of the Judaizers. Unfortunately like many preachers today it seems the Church Fathers were inconsistent when it came to articulating *how to receive the gift of eternal life*—by faith alone in Christ alone that occurs at a point-in-time (see John 3:16; 5:24; 6:40, 47)—and *how to grow in eternal life*—by faith and obedience as a process occurring up-to-a-point-in-time (see Gal 6:8; 1 Tim 6:11-12). Perhaps many of them were saved in spite of later misunderstanding the salvation-by-grace message, because at one point they believed that simply by faith alone in Christ alone they received eternal life and were justified apart from works. But again, if this occurred, it happened in lieu of their theology when at one moment they believed that by faith alone in Christ alone they were assured of their eternal destiny. However, the evidence shows that most of them either did not believe God's free grace doctrine initially, and certainly the evidence, no doubt, shows they did not end with a clear understanding of grace and knowing how to separate justification and sanctification. Hence, this resulted in a

commingling of grace and works doctrine in order to have eternal life that destroyed God's grace formula in how one attains eternal life illustrated by what Paul penned in Romans 4:2-5: "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has *something* to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "*Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*" Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness." Simply put: their understanding of grace remains wanting.

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