

Four Witnesses: The Early Church in Her Own Words

Rod Bennett, Ignatius Press, 2002, \$17.95, 346pp.

Summarized by Dan Brent

The author stumbled unexpectedly into some old volumes of material from the Church Fathers of the first Christian centuries. He was startled to find that the church they were describing was the Catholic Church of today! He immediately “encountered four eloquent witnesses squarely straddling the alleged gap between apostolic and post apostolic Christianity.” For months he read them and “let the spirit of their ‘pure and undefiled’ Christianity wash over me like a bath.”

Clement of Rome

Clement, pope in the 90’s AD in Rome wrote a letter to the Corinthians about thirty years after Paul had sent his two well-known letters to the same community. As background, the author notes that Jesus had presented himself as the Good Shepherd promised by Ezekiel. But what happens when he leaves? We are reminded that, after his resurrection, Jesus commissioned Simon Peter to “Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep.”

Clement was apparently born in Rome in the first Christian century at the time of the *Pax Romana*. Rome was the only superpower but, internally, was rotting with luxury, corruption, crime, high taxes, unemployment, prostitution, and class divisions. Apparently seeking meaning in life amid the chaotic abundance of deities and philosophies in Rome, Clement found the Jesus message newly exported from Judea.

History documents that Peter was in Rome, at least on and off, from about 42 AD until his death in about 67 AD. Before there was assembled a NEW testament in writing, there was only the word of the apostles and witnesses. And their instruction was celebrated, cherished, and passed on by the families of believers they assembled – the churches.

Nero’s persecution took the lives of Peter and Paul – probably in 67 AD. By the year 70 AD, the church’s apostles were all gone. John was in his Patmos exile and the rest apparently had all been killed. It was about 25 years after this that a new crisis in faith erupted in Corinth.

By now, Clement, at about 60, was Bishop of Rome. He wrote a stern letter to the church at Corinth in about 96 AD. It has survived. It starts out noting the praiseworthy conduct that made Corinth a model Christian community in the past. But that has been lost in factions and strife. The apostles had taught the message they received from Jesus and then chose bishops and deacons for future believers. On their deaths, other men were appointed to succeed them. In Corinth, Clement saw it shameful that some would revolt against the presbyters. He calls those people to repentance and submissiveness.

Clement sent the letter with emissaries who he hoped would, with it, restore order in Corinth.

Ignatius of Antioch

Mentored by the apostle John and probably ordained by Peter himself, Ignatius succeeded Peter as Bishop at Antioch. He saw that church through the persecution of Domitian and into more peaceful times. But competing with him was a breakaway sect of Christians, the Docetists, who denied that Jesus was truly human. This theology would allow Christians to fit in better with the plethora of Roman deities and beliefs.

In the Trajan persecution, Ignatius was sent in chains to Rome. On the way, in Smyrna, he wrote three letters which are preserved. They give us a remarkable picture of Christianity in the days soon after the passing of the apostles.

The authority of the bishops (though occasionally elected by the people, according to the *Didache*) came from the imposition of hands by an apostle or one of their successors. The bishops were the guardians of orthodoxy and were to be obeyed.

He speaks of three types of Church officers: the bishop who embodies the authority of God the Father, the presbyters (or elders) who assist him, and the deacons who obey the presbyters. “He that does anything apart from the bishop, presbytery, or deacon has no pure conscience.”

Ignatius at last, in 107 AD, reached Rome and was killed by lions in the Coliseum.

Justin Martyr

Converted to Christianity at Ephesus in about 130 AD, Justin went to Rome in about 140 AD. There in Rome in about 153 AD, he composed a letter to the emperor Antoninus – his *Apologia*. In it, Justin calls for objectivity in judging Christianity rather than mindless persecution. He then lays out a summary of the beliefs and practices of the Christians.

Christians worship a God who is Creator and Father. He sent his son Jesus Christ, crucified by Pontius Pilate, to teach us to live chastely and moderately, forgiving enemies and building a kingdom not of this world. People enter the group in a washing in the name of God our Father, his son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. After that we pray and then greet each other with a kiss.

Then he describes for the emperor the Sunday worship experience. We gather and first read the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets. Then the “Ruler” instructs and exhorts those present. Then bread and wine mixed with water is brought to the Ruler who offers thanks.

[The author here injects a 215 AD passage from Hippolytus of Rome that quotes the Eucharistic Prayer as he knew it. It reads like a twenty-first century missal! “The Lord be with you.” “And with your spirit.” “Hearts aloft!” “We keep them with the Lord!” “Let us give thanks to the Lord.” “It is right and just.” Etc.!]

Justin's letter continues with an explanation for the emperor of Eucharist and how Jesus commanded that this should be done in his memory. A collection is taken and given to the Ruler, who uses it to take care of the orphans and widows.

The emperor was unmoved by the letter. His successor, his son Marcus Aurilius, actually started a new persecution. And in it Justin was martyred in 165 AD. That emperor himself died in 180, camped on the Danube facing the advance of the barbarians who would in time topple Rome.

Irenaeus of Lyons

Originally from Smyrna (Asia), Irenaeus had gone to Gaul (France) to preach as an early missionary. When the clergy at Lugdunum (Lyons) were all martyred in 177 AD, he was chosen to be the new bishop.

He was disturbed at the success of varieties of the Donatist heresy (Jesus had no real body because flesh is bad). He wrote *Against Heresies*, an attack on the errors that were creating "dozens of tiny independent denominations". They cited, as the authority for their theories, scripture – as they interpreted it.

But the church of Jesus does not splinter. It preaches with one voice. All over the world, "the import of the tradition is one and the same." This happened because "Jesus passed down His authority to speak for God to the disciples" and "they, in turn, passed this authority down to their successors."

In citing scripture, the heretics set "the apostolic books against the apostolic disciples." Fifteen years later, Tertullian taunted the heretics for using scripture – the church's treasure – as stolen property for their own arguments!

This was Irenaeus's test for orthodoxy: "With this church (Rome), because of its superior origin (Peter and Paul), all churches must agree, that is, all the faithful of the whole world; and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the apostolic succession." Cyprian of Carthage, writing in 251 AD, makes the same argument for the reliability of the bishop of Rome.

So the church of the apostles survived and the heretical teachings of Simon Magus, reappearing in several guises through the first millennium of Christianity, eventually flickered out.

In an Afterword, the author confesses that the discoveries he found in these four witnesses changed his perceptions. The Church of Jesus of the first two centuries did recognize the unique role of Peter and his successors. It had the ritual we call "mass" – startlingly with many of the very words we hear now in the Roman Catholic celebration.

In the end, the author himself decided that the Roman Church “is the Church to whose founders Jesus declared ‘He who hears you, hears me.’”

In an Appendix, Bennett quotes a variety of Church Fathers to set their teachings next to Catholic Church teachings on a number of key subjects: Church, papacy, baptism, Eucharist, Mary, the saints and purgatory. The parallels are apparent.