

The Evolution of God

3. Fragments of the Apostolic Fathers

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The earliest Christian writers whose works have survived, those known to have direct connections to the Apostles, were one disciple of Paul (Clement of Rome) and two disciples of John (Polycarp¹ of Smyrna and Ignatius² of Antioch). These authors had been personally instructed by the Apostles and were leaders within the Christian assemblies established by the Apostles. The writings of these men were addressed to fellow believers or assemblies, being pastoral in nature rather than apologetic. They did not attempt to refute heresy or extensively define doctrines, since commonality of doctrine was assumed between writer and his audience. Their surviving works did not attempt to interact with pagans or portray Christianity in ways the pagans could easily digest. They were intended to be read and digested by Christians. These most ancient specimens reflect the common Christian belief in the personal preexistence of the Son of God as the “Word” (Logos) of John’s prologue, His emptying Himself to become fully human, His exaltation to the right hand of God, and His future role as King.

Earliest Christian Writers with direct Connections to the Apostles:

Clement of Rome:

In his epistle to the Corinthians, Clement of Rome referred to Jesus Christ as the speaker in Psalm 118:18, calling Him the “Word.” Clement writes: “For thus *saith the holy Word*: ‘The Lord hath severely chastened me, yet hath not given me over to death.’”³ That the one speaking in Psalm 118 is the Son of God is shown just four verses later: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD’S doing; It is marvelous in our eyes.”⁴ Jesus applied this Psalm to Himself,⁵ and Peter also applied it to Christ.⁶ Thus Clement referred to Christ as “the holy Word,” giving us a glimpse into his interpretation of the “Word” in John’s prologue.

¹ AD 69-155

² AD 35-140 The longer version of the Epistles of Ignatius have been heavily edited by later Roman Catholic writers, and cannot be trusted to actually reflect the views of Ignatius.

³ 1 Clement, ch. lvi quoting Psalm 118:18

⁴ Psalm 118:22-23

⁵ Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17

⁶ 1 Peter 2:7

The Evolution of God – 3. Fragments of the Apostolic Fathers

A second work⁷ bearing the name of Clement of Rome was written about the same time John wrote Revelation. This work is believed to be the oldest transcript of a Christian sermon outside the New Testament. 2 Clement affirms three critical points:

1. The Son of God as agent of creation:

*“... Jesus Christ submitted to suffer for our sakes. What return, then, shall we make to Him, or what fruit that shall be worthy of that which He has given to us? ... For He had compassion on us, and mercifully saved us, observing the many errors in which we were entangled, as well as the destruction to which we were exposed, and that we had no hope of salvation except it came to us from Him. For He called us when we were not, **and willed that out of nothing we should attain a real existence.**”⁸*

2. The Son of God was first “Spirit,” but then “became flesh”

*“We must therefore preserve the flesh as the temple of God. For as ye were called in the flesh, ye shall also come [to be judged] in the flesh. As Christ the Lord who saved us, **though He was first a Spirit, became flesh,** and thus called us so shall we also receive the reward in this flesh.”⁹*

3. The “assembly”¹⁰ began even before the sun and moon were created, in the person of the Son, and thus all who have been since creation joined to Him:

*“So, then, brethren, if we do the will of our Father God, **we shall be members of the first church, the spiritual, — that which was created before sun and moon;** ... So, then, let us elect to belong to **the church of life,** that we may be saved. I think not that ye are ignorant that **the living church is the body of Christ** (for the Scripture, saith, “God created man male and female;”¹¹ **the male is Christ,** the female the church,) and that the Books and the Apostles teach that **the church is not of the present, but from the beginning. For it was spiritual, as was also our Jesus, and was made manifest at the end of the days in order***

⁷ Eusebius noted that there was a second work of Clement, but questioned its authorship. 2 Clement bears strong indications of being a transcript of an oral sermon. A manuscript (circa AD 1056) written by someone named Leo contains both works together labeled “Clement to the Corinthians I” and “Clement to the Corinthians II.” Since 1 Clement was written to the Corinthians, it is likely that 2 Clement was preached by Clement at Corinth as a follow-up and recorded by someone present. In any case, it is acknowledged by most that 2 Clement dates near the end of the 1st cent.

⁸ 2 Clement, ch. i

⁹ 2 Clement, ch. ix

¹⁰ The word translated “assembly” or “church” means a gathering, and requires two or more. When the Son was begotten by God, there were two, and we are added to the only-begotten Son as adopted sons.

¹¹ Clement drew this analogy by elaborating upon Paul’s statements concerning the great mystery in Eph. 5:22-32.

The Evolution of God – 3. Fragments of the Apostolic Fathers

*to save us.*¹² *The church being spiritual, was made manifest in the flesh of Christ, signifying to us that if any one of us shall preserve it in the flesh and corrupt it not, he shall receive it in the Holy Spirit.*¹³

This extremely early sermon indicates a belief in **the real transmutation of the Son of God** from “Spirit” to “flesh,” from full divinity to full humanity.¹⁴

Ignatius of Antioch [AD 30-107]:

Ignatius was born about the year of Jesus’ crucifixion, and became a Christian at an early age. According to early tradition, Ignatius was ordained pastor of the assembly in Antioch, Syria (Paul’s home assembly) and was recommended for that position by the Apostle Peter just before his martyrdom in AD 67. Ignatius was a student of the Apostle John along with Polycarp of Smyrna and Papias. Ignatius was a firm believer in the preexistence of Christ, that He was “begotten” of God at the beginning of creation. He held firmly to what has been called the “Logos doctrine” – the Son as the preincarnate “Word” coming down from heaven and becoming flesh.¹⁵

He spoke of Jesus Christ as *“possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; **God existing in flesh**; true life in death; both of Mary and of God.”*¹⁶ Again, Ignatius writes in his epistle to the Magnesians: *“[Y]our bishop presides in the place of God, and your presbyters in the place of the assembly of the apostles, along with your deacons, who are most dear to me, and are entrusted with the ministry of **Jesus Christ, who was with the Father before the beginning of time**, and in the end was revealed.”*¹⁷ The longer version, which has been expanded by a later editor of Ignatius’ works, reads: *“He, being begotten by the Father before the beginning of time, was God the Word, the only-begotten Son, and remains the same forever.”*

Again, Ignatius wrote: *“[T]here is one God, who has manifested Himself by **Jesus Christ His Son, who is His eternal Word**, not proceeding forth from silence, and who in all things pleased Him that sent Him.”*¹⁸ The longer version of this passage explains what was meant by the

¹² 1 Pet. 1:20 see: <http://www.4windsfellowships.net/articles/God/foreknowledge.pdf>

¹³ 2 Clement, ch. xiv

¹⁴ This was contrary to the development of the doctrine of incarnation later, which was based on Platonism. This view supposed that change was impossible for the divine nature, and so substituted the biblical transformation to humanity (the Word became flesh) with a Platonic dualistic view of Christ, as a divine Spirit housed in a body of flesh. This view became known as “hypostatic union” in Roman Catholic Trinitarian dogma.

¹⁵ This fact is fatal to the attempt by Biblical Unitarians to portray Justin Martyr as the source of the Logos doctrine.

¹⁶ Ignatius, Epistle to the Ephesians, ch. vii (short {original} version)

¹⁷ Ignatius, Epistle to the Magnesians, ch. vi (short {original} version).

¹⁸ Ignatius, Epistle to the Magnesians, ch. viii (short {original} version). The longer version of this passage explains what was meant by the clause “not proceeding forth from silence.” It reads: *“[T]here is one God, the Almighty, who has*

The Evolution of God – 3. Fragments of the Apostolic Fathers

clause “not proceeding forth from silence.” It reads: “[T]here is one God, the Almighty, who has manifested Himself by Jesus Christ His Son, who is His Word, not spoken, but essential. For He is not the voice of an articulate utterance, but a substance begotten by divine power, who has in all things pleased Him that sent Him.”

Again, Ignatius emphasized the existence of the Son of God before He became flesh: “... Jesus Christ, the Son of God who became afterwards of the seed of David and Abraham.”¹⁹

Again, Ignatius encouraged Polycarp, his fellow pupil of John’s, to be steadfast in the face of the Gnostic heretics: “Look for Him who is above all time, eternal²⁰ and invisible, yet who became visible for our sakes; impalpable and impassible,²¹ yet who became passible on our account; and who in every kind of way suffered for our sakes.”²²

Several times Ignatius warned against the Gnostic teachers who claimed that the divine Son of God only appeared to become flesh when He came down from heaven. Ignatius did not in any way challenge that He was the divine Son of God prior to becoming flesh or that He came down from heaven. Rather, he rebuked their heresy that the Son did not truly become flesh and truly die as a man. For example, “For what does anyone profit me, if he commends me, but blasphemes my Lord, not confessing that He was [truly] possessed of a body? But he who does not acknowledge this, has in fact altogether denied Him, being enveloped in death.”²³

As a contemporary and former student of John’s, it is virtually impossible that Ignatius would misunderstand John’s usage of the term “Logos” (Word) in the prologue of His Gospel. Thus we have at least two writers, Clement and Ignatius, who were themselves taught by the Apostles Paul and John, both of whom affirmed the preexistence of Christ as the Word of John’s prologue.

Similar quotes from the longer (edited) version of Ignatius’ works could be multiplied here, but their value is secondary because the time and editor(s) cannot be ascertained

manifested Himself by Jesus Christ His Son, who is His Word, not spoken, but essential. For He is not the voice of an articulate utterance, but a substance begotten by divine power, who has in all things pleased Him that sent Him.”

¹⁹ Ignatius, Epistle to the Romans, ch. vii (short {original} version)

²⁰ Lit. “age-enduring” without reference to eternity prior to the 6 days of creation

²¹ “Impassible” means not capable of suffering, while “passible” means capable of suffering and death. This statement shows that Ignatius did not hold to hypostatic union (the Platonic incarnation) which casts the Son of God as remaining a divine being while merely cloaking Himself in human flesh. Rather, Ignatius believed in the complete transformation of the Son of God to Son of Man, where the Son emptied Himself of His divine qualities in order to become completely human (Phil. 2:5-8). See the 6th article in this series for further discussion.

²² Ignatius, Epistle to Polycarp, ch. iii

²³ Ignatius, Epistle to the Smyrnaeans, ch. v

The Evolution of God – 3. Fragments of the Apostolic Fathers

with certainty.²⁴ Yet these statements are consistent with those above from the unedited versions. For example: "...but that you may rather attain to the full assurance in Christ, who was begotten by the Father before all ages, but was afterwards born of the virgin Mary without any intercourse with man."²⁵ Again, "...who was truly begotten of God and of the virgin, but not after the same manner. For indeed God and man are not the same. He truly assumed a body; for 'the Word was made flesh,' and lived upon earth without sin."²⁶ Statements of this kind are abundant in the longer embellished version of Ignatius' works.

Other Christian Writers Contiguous to the Apostolic Age:

There are other Christian works known to have been written very close to John's death, in the first half of the second century. While virtually nothing is known of the authors, and thus no direct link to one of the Apostles can be positively established, they nevertheless provide specimens from various Christian assemblies at the close of the apostolic age.

Barnabas of Alexandria:

The Epistle of Barnabas is usually dated to the end of the first century (AD 100), about the time of John's death, although some date it earlier. It comes from the area of Alexandria where there were large Christian and Jewish communities. According to Barnabas, Christians believed the Son of God was God's Agent in creation.

"And further, my brethren: if the Lord endured to suffer for our soul, He being Lord of all the world, to whom God said at the foundation of the world, "Let us make man after our image, and after our likeness," understand how it was that He endured to suffer at the hand of men."²⁷

And again:

"For the Scripture says concerning us, while He speaks to the Son, "Let Us make man after Our image, and after Our likeness; and let them have dominion over the beasts of the earth, and the fowls of heaven, and the fishes of the sea."²⁸

²⁴ That Ignatius' works were edited at least a half century after his death is evident by the fact that the edited version supports the later doctrine of the incarnation that was first articulated by Melito of Sardis as a reaction to Celsus' attack on primitive Christianity. However, the short (unedited) version does not support the later development of the incarnation in conformity to Platonism. See the 6th article in this series for a fuller explanation.

²⁵ Ignatius, Epistle to the Magnesians, ch. xi

²⁶ Ignatius, Epistle to the Trallians, ch. ix

²⁷ Epistle of Barnabas, ch. V

²⁸ Epistle of Barnabas, ch. VI

The Evolution of God – 3. Fragments of the Apostolic Fathers

Aristides of Athens:

Another important very early witness still in the shadow of John's ministry is an apology written by Aristides of Athens and presented to the emperor Hadrian in AD 125.²⁹ Unlike the previous specimens which were primarily pastoral, this one was apologetic in nature. Its purpose was to seek relief for Christians from the Roman persecution by explaining the benign nature of Christianity, that it was no threat to Rome.

*“Now the Christians trace their origin from the Lord Jesus Christ. And He is acknowledged by the Holy Spirit to be **the son of the most high God, who came down from heaven for the salvation of men.** And being born of a pure virgin, unbegotten and immaculate **He assumed flesh** and revealed himself among men that He might recall them to Himself from their wander-lug after many gods. And having accomplished His wonderful dispensation, by a voluntary choice He tasted death on the cross, fulfilling an august dispensation. And after three days He came to life again and ascended into heaven. And if you would read, O King, you may judge the glory of His presence from the holy gospel writing, as it is called among themselves. He had twelve disciples, who after His ascension to heaven went forth into the provinces of the whole world, and declared His greatness. As for instance, **one of them traversed the countries about us, proclaiming the doctrine of the truth.** From this it is, that they who still observe the righteousness enjoined by their preaching are called Christians.”³⁰*

From this statement it is clear that Christians around Athens, of which Corinth was nearby, also held to the preexistence of Christ as only-begotten Son of God, having come down from heaven to partake of full humanity through the virgin birth. His subordinate position to the Father is noted by calling Him “*Son of the most high God.*” Notice also that Aristides claimed that this was apostolic tradition from Paul³¹ when he preached and taught in Greece (both Athens and Corinth), and he included Paul among the Twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ.

²⁹ Eusebius, has a chapter (Ecclesiastical History, Bk. IV., ch iii) titled, “*The authors that wrote in defense of the faith in the reign of Hadrian, A.D. 117-138.*” He writes: “*Aristides also, a man faithfully devoted to the religion we profess, like Quadratus, has left to posterity a defense of the faith, addressed to Hadrian. This work is also preserved by a great number, even to the present day.*” Eusebius in his Chronicon states that the Emperor Hadrian visited Athens in the eighth year of his reign (i.e., A.D. 125) and took part in the Eleusinian mysteries. In the same connection the historian mentions the presentation of Apologies to the Emperor by Quadratus and Aristides, “*an Athenian philosopher;*” and implies that Hadrian was induced by these appeals, coupled with a letter from Serenius Granianus, proconsul of Asia, to issue an Imperial rescript forbidding the punishment of Christians without careful investigation and trial.

³⁰ Aristides, Apology, ch. XV

³¹ Notice that Aristides believed that Paul was the 12th Apostle, not a 13th.

The Evolution of God – 3. Fragments of the Apostolic Fathers

The Shepherd of Hermas:

The “Shepherd” was a document written from Rome circa AD 150. It contains a series of parables and allegories meant to illustrate Christian truths in an allegorical manner similar to John Bunyan’s 1678 classic, *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

*“And in the middle of the plain he showed me a large white rock that had arisen out of the plain. And the rock was more lofty than the mountains, rectangular in shape, so as to be capable of containing the whole world: and **that rock Was old**, having a gate cut out of it; and the cutting out of **the gate seemed to me as if recently done**. And the gate glittered to such a degree under the sunbeams, that I marveled at the splendor of the gate; and round about the gate were standing twelve virgins.”³²*

*“First of all, sir,” I said, “explain this to me: What is the meaning of the rock and the gate?” **“This rock,” he answered, “and this gate are the Son of God.**” “How, sir?” I said; “the rock is old, and the gate is new.” “Listen,” he said, “and understand, O ignorant man. **The Son of God is older than all His creatures, so that He was a fellow-councilor with the Father in His work of creation:**³³ for this reason is He old.” “And why is the gate new, sir?” I said. “Because,” he answered, “He became manifest in the last days of the dispensation:³⁴ for this reason the gate was made new, that they who are to be saved by it might enter into the kingdom of God.”³⁵*

There were many more writers from the second half of the second century which affirm the preexistence of the Son of God in greater detail. These will be dealt with in the next article in this series. Yet the primitive examples given above are sufficient to prove that belief in the preexistence of Christ as Son of God was the Faith of the earliest Christians and was based upon the teaching of the Apostles themselves. Unitarian claims to the contrary, that such beliefs originated from Greek philosophy and not from Apostolic testimony, fly in the face of the earliest evidence.

Early Christian Worship of Jesus Christ

A critical point concerning the earliest Christian view of Christ can also be gleaned from the practice of Christians from apostolic times. The nature of the Son of God as being more than merely a man is clear from the fact that they unanimously worshipped the Son along with the Father. For Christians, no other beings were to be worshipped other than the Father, creator of all things, and His only-begotten Son. Jesus Himself, citing Moses,

³² Shepherd of Hermas, Bk. III, Similitudes XI, ch. ii

³³ Prov. 8:22-31 LXX

³⁴ 1 Pet. 1:20, see: <http://www.4windsfellowships.net/articles/God/foreknowledge.pdf>

³⁵ Ibid, ch. xii

The Evolution of God – 3. Fragments of the Apostolic Fathers

stated that “*You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.*”³⁶ Yet it was common knowledge from earliest times (even among the Jews) that Christians worshipped the Son of God just as they worshipped God Himself. Had the earliest Christians in apostolic times not viewed the Son as in some sense equal (or equitable) with the Father they could not worship Him as such without transgressing Jesus’ own words above or the Shema. In the Martyrdom of Polycarp,³⁷ the following account appears which is quite revealing:

*“But when the adversary of the race of the righteous, the envious, malicious, and wicked one, perceived the impressive nature of his martyrdom, and [considered] the blameless life he had led from the beginning, and how he was now crowned with the wreath of immortality, having beyond dispute received his reward, he did his utmost that not the least memorial of him should be taken away by us, although many desired to do this, and to become possessors of his holy flesh. For this end he suggested it to Nicetes, the father of Herod and brother of Alce, to go and entreat the governor not to give up his body to be buried, “lest,” said he, **“forsaking Him that was crucified, they begin to worship this one.”** This he said at the suggestion and urgent persuasion of the Jews, who also watched us, as we sought to take him out of the fire, being ignorant of this, that it is neither possible for us ever to forsake Christ, who suffered for the salvation of such as shall be saved throughout the whole world (the blameless one for sinners), **nor to worship any other. For Him indeed, as being the Son of God, we adore;** but the martyrs, as disciples and followers of the Lord, we worthily love on account of their extraordinary affection towards their own King and Master, of whom may we also be made companions and fellow-disciples!”³⁸*

It was the Jews in Smyrna who urged the governor not to release Polycarp’s body claiming that the Christians might cease worshipping Christ and worship Polycarp instead. It was therefore common knowledge among the Jews that Christians worshipped the Son of God. The unique place of worship of the Son of God by Christians was absolutely apostolic and biblical, drawn from the fact that the Son, first being “equal with God” chose to “empty Himself” and take the form of man, and chose to die for mankind. It was for these reasons that God exalted Him back to the glory He had with the Father at the very beginning, as Jesus prayed: “*And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.*”³⁹

³⁶ Matt. 4:10

³⁷ Early 2nd century

³⁸ Martyrdom of Polycarp, ch. 17

³⁹ John 17:5

The Evolution of God – 3. Fragments of the Apostolic Fathers

Philippians 2:5-8 (NASB)

*5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 **Therefore** also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

These quotes are sufficient to show that the preexistence of Christ, His role as God's Agent in creation, His transmutation to become fully human, and His being worshipped along with the Father Himself were all accepted Christian teachings among the apostolic Christian assemblies at about the time of John's death. As we now move beyond the shadow of John and his apostolic authority, we will see that the post-apostolic Christians remained faithful and consistent for at least a century after John's death, with few exceptions.

Part 4, The Early Christian Apologists

www.4windsfellowships.net/articles/God/Evolution_004.pdf