

THE EARLY CHRISTIANS: WERE THEY PROTESTANT OR CATHOLIC?

By: Jim Seghers

It is a common belief among Protestants that Protestantism reflects the pure Christianity of the Apostolic Church. In contrast they charge that the Roman Catholic Church represents a corruption of Christianity that began after the emperor Constantine and Licinius issued the Edict of Milan in 313, which gave Christians unrestricted freedom of worship. Therefore, it is believed that in the Christian writings of the first three centuries one discovers the undiluted Biblical Christianity so dear to the hearts of Protestants, namely, a faith that was based on the Bible alone, *sola scriptura*.

This essay will explore the validity these claims by examining these early Christian writings under five headings: Papal primacy, the hierarchical structure of the Church, the Eucharist, the sacrifice of the Mass, and Tradition.

The Didache (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles) 40-60 A.D.

The date assigned to the composition of the Didache varies widely. The non-Catholic scholar John A. T. Robinson concluded that it was composed between 40 and 60 A.D.¹ Others believe that it was compiled in its present form “closer to the end of the first century.”² The Didache is the oldest source of church law. The first ten chapters focus on liturgical instructions with the rules of morality set forth as two ways: one of good and the other of evil. The second part, chapters 11-15, is made up of disciplinary regulations.

Hierarchical Structure of the Church

“Elect therefore for yourselves *bishops and deacons* worthy of the Lord, humble men and not covetous, and faithful and well tested; for they also serve you in the ministry of the prophets and teachers. Do not, therefore, despise them for they are the honored men among you along with the prophets and teachers.”³

Eucharist

“Regarding the Eucharist. Give thanks as follows:

First concerning the cup: ‘We give Thee thanks, Our Father, for the Holy Vine of David Thy servant, which Thou hast made known to us through Thy Servant Jesus. To Three be the glory of evermore.’

Next, concerning the broken bread:

‘We give Thee thanks, Our Father, for the life and knowledge Thou hast made known to us through Jesus Thy Servant. To Thee be the glory for evermore. As the broken bread was scattered over the hills and then when gathered, became one mass, so may Thy

¹ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, p. 327.

² J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer translators, *The Apostolic Fathers*, second edition, edited and revised by Michael W. Holmes, p. 146.

³ John R. Willis, *The Teaching of the Church Fathers*, #20, pp. 51-52.

Church be gathered from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom. For Thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for evermore.’

Let no one eat and drink of your Eucharist but those baptized in the name of the Lord; for concerning this also did the Lord say: Do not give to dogs what is sacred.”⁴

Subsequently in chapter 10 the Eucharist is identified as “*spiritual food and drink*” to differentiate it from that which is merely natural food and drink.⁵

1 Clement: Letter to the Corinthians: 95/96 A.D.

Clement was the third successor of St. Peter as the bishop of Rome. Epiphanius and Tertullian affirm that Clement was consecrated by St. Peter. Irenaeus gave the added information that he knew both St. Peter and St. Paul.⁶ This letter was occasioned by a revolt of some younger men against the leadership of the local church in Corinth. The leaders of the congregation were so disturbed at this breach of conduct and order, they sent a long letter to the Bishop of Rome along with mediators in an effort to restore peace. This letter was held in such great esteem that Clement of Alexandria cited it as Scripture. It was made also included in some copies of the New Testament.⁷

Papal Primacy

The fact that a local church would appeal to the bishop of Rome to resolve an internal conflict attests to the primacy of the bishop of Rome. In addition it gives explicit testimony to the hierarchical structure of this church.

Hierarchical Structure of the Church

“The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent forth from God. So then Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ.... So, preaching both in the country and in the towns, they appointed their firstfruits, when they had tested them by the Spirit, to be *bishops* and *deacons* for the future believers. And this was no new thing they did for indeed something had been written about *bishops* and *deacons* many years ago; for somewhere thus says the Scriptures: ‘I will appoint their *bishops* in righteousness and their *deacons* in faith.’⁸ And is it any wonder that those who in Christ were entrusted by God with such a work appointed the officials, just mentioned?”⁹

“You, therefore, who laid the foundation of the revolt, must submit to the *presbyters* and accept discipline leading to repentance, bending the knees of your heart.”¹⁰

⁴ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. I, p. 32.

⁵ *Patrology*, Vol. I, p. 33.

⁶ *Patrology*, Vol. I, p.42.

⁷ *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 35.

⁸ Is 60:17 as quoted in the Septuagint.

⁹ *1 Clement* from *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 51, italics mine.

¹⁰ *1 Clement* from *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 60, italics mine

“Our apostles likewise knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife over the *bishop’s office*. For this reason, therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, *they appointed the officials* mentioned earlier and afterwards *they gave the offices a permanent character*; that is, if they should die, other approved men should *succeed to their ministry*.”¹¹

Letters of Ignatius of Antioch: 98-117 A.D.

The apostle John taught St. Ignatius, which gave him a direct and immediate link to the teaching of the apostles. He was the third bishop of Antioch in Syria. His seven letters were written during his journey to Rome where he was sent to be martyred in the arena. Ignatius was first to use the term “Catholic Church” in reference to faithful Christians collectively.¹²

“It appears that three concerns were uppermost in Ignatius’s mind at this time: (1) the struggle against false teachers within the churches; (2) the unity and structure of the churches; and (3) his own pending death. To Ignatius, the false teachers within posed a greater threat than the pagan society without. *‘Heresy’* [Eph. 6:2; Trall. 6.1], whether that of the Judaizers, whose teaching tended to diminish the importance and centrality of Christ, or of the docetists who, being influenced by the common view that matter was evil, tended to deny the reality of Jesus’ humanity, threatened to split the church and thereby destroy the God-given unity which for Ignatius was one of the distinguishing marks of the true faith.”¹³

“In opposing the false teachers Ignatius, in addition to affirming both the divinity of Jesus and the reality of his incarnation, suffering, and resurrection, *stresses the importance of the bishop* in preserving the unity of the church. He does this on two levels. First, while Ignatius’s ideal church may have a threefold ministry that includes deacons and presbyters, *it is the bishop who is constitutive of the church: where he is, the church is*. Any activity or service that takes place without either his presence or permission has no validity. Thus those schismatics who gather separately *cut themselves off from the true church*. Second, the central role of the bishop organizationally has a theological rationale: *the bishop is nothing less than God’s representative to the congregation*.”¹⁴ These are amazing admissions from renown Protestant scholars.

Hierarchical Structure of the Church

Letter to the Ephesians: He calls Onesimus “your earthly *bishop*,” Burrhus “your *deacon*” and states: “It is proper, therefore, in every way to glorify Jesus Christ, who has glorified you, so that you, joined together in a united *obedience and subject to the bishop and the presbytery*, may be sanctified in every respect.”¹⁵

¹¹ *I Clement* from *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 52, italics mine.

¹² *Patrology*, Vol. I, p. 66.

¹³ *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 80.

¹⁴ *The Apostolic Fathers*, pp.80-81.

¹⁵ *Letter to the Ephesians*, from *The Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 86-87, italics mine.

“Thus it is proper for you to act together in harmony with the mind of the *bishop*, as you are in fact doing. For your *presbytery*, which is worthy of its name and worthy of God, is attuned to the *bishop* as strings to a lyre. Therefore in your unanimity and harmonious love Jesus Christ is sung.”¹⁶

“Let us, therefore, be careful not to oppose the *bishop*, in order that we may be obedient to God.”¹⁷

Letter to the Magnesians: He addressed “Damas your *bishop* (he’s a credit to God!), and of your worthy *presbyters*, Bassus and Apollonius, and of my fellow slave, the *deacon* Zotion. I am delighted with him, because he *submits to the bishop as to God’s grace*, and *to the presbytery as to the law of Jesus Christ*. Now, it is not right to presume on the youthfulness of your bishop. You ought to respect him as *fully as you respect the authority of God the Father*... Let the *bishop preside in God’s place*, and the *presbyters* take the place of the apostolic council, and let the *deacons* (my special favorites) be entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ who was with the Father from eternity and appeared at the end [of the world].”¹⁸

“As, then, the Lord did nothing without the Father (either on his own or by the apostles) because he was at one with him, so *you must not do anything without the bishop and presbyters*.”¹⁹

“*Defer to the bishop* and to one another as Jesus Christ did to the Father in the days of his flesh, and as the apostles did to Christ, to the Father, and to the Spirit. In that way we shall achieve complete unity.”²⁰

Letter to the Trallians: He identified Polybius, their *bishop*. Then he declared: “For *when you obey the bishop as if he were Jesus Christ*, you are (as I see it) living not in a merely human fashion but in Jesus Christ’s way.... It is essential, therefore, to act in no way without the *bishop*, just as you are doing. Rather *submit even the presbytery as to the apostles of Jesus Christ*.”²¹

“Correspondingly, everyone must show the *deacons* respect. They represent Jesus Christ, just as the *bishop* has the role of the Father, and the *presbyters* are like God’s council and in apostolic band. *You cannot have a church without these*. I am sure you agree with me in this.”²²

¹⁶ Letter to the Ephesians, from *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 87, italics mine.

¹⁷ Letter to the Ephesians, from *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 88, italics mine.

¹⁸ Letter to the Magnesians, from Cyril C. Richardson translator and editor, *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 95, italics mine.

¹⁹ Letter to the Magnesians, from *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 96, italics mine.

²⁰ Letter to the Magnesians, from *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 97, italics mine.

²¹ Letter to the Trallians, from *Early Christian Fathers*, pp. 98-99

²² Letter to the Trallians, from *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 99.

“Inside the *sanctuary* a man is pure; outside he is impure. That means: whoever does anything without *bishop, presbytery, and deacons* does not have a clear conscience.”²³

“*Submit to the bishop* as to [God’s] law, and to the *presbytery* too.”²⁴

Letter to the Philadelphians: “You are the very personification of eternal and perpetual joy. This is especially true if you are at one with the *bishop*, and with the *presbyters* and *deacons*, who are on his side and who have been appointed by the will of Jesus Christ. By his Holy Spirit and in accordance with his own will *he validated their appointment*. I well realize that this *bishop* of yours does not owe his ministry to his own efforts or to men.... Rather does he owe it to the love of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...For he is in tune with the commandments as a harp is with its strings.”²⁵

“When I was with you I cried out, raising my voice – it was God’s voice – ‘*Pay heed to the bishop, the presbytery, and the deacons*’.”²⁶

“The Lord forgives all who repent-if, that is, their repentance brings them into God’s unity and *to the bishop’s council*.”²⁷

Letter to the Smyrnaeans: “Let no one do anything that has to do with the church without the *bishop*. Only that *Eucharist* which is under the authority of the *bishop* (or whomever he himself designates) is to be considered valid. Wherever the *bishop appears*, there let the congregation be, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, *there is the catholic church*.... The one who honors the *bishop* has been honored by God, the *one who does anything without the bishop’s knowledge serves the devil*.”²⁸

Letter to Polycarp: Ignatius gives this advice to Polycarp, “Do not let anything be done without your consent.”²⁹

“It is right for men and women who marry to be united with the *bishop’s* approval... Pay attention to the *bishop* so that God will pay attention to you. I give my life as a sacrifice (poor that it is) for those who are obedient to the *bishop, the presbyters, and the deacons*.”³⁰

Eucharist

Letter to the Ephesians: “Let no one be misled: if anyone is not within the *sanctuary*, he lacks the *bread of God* (Jn 6:33).”³¹

²³ Letter to the Trallians, from *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 100.

²⁴ Letter to the Trallians, from *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 101.

²⁵ Letter to the Philadelphians, from *Early Christian Fathers*, pp. 107-108

²⁶ Letter to the Ephesians, from *The Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 109-110, italics mine.

²⁷ Letter to the Ephesians, from *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 110, italics mine.

²⁸ Letter to the Smyrnaeans from *The Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 112-113, italics mine.

²⁹ Letter to Polycarp from *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 119.

³⁰ Letter to Polycarp from *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 119, italics mine.

³¹ Letter to the Ephesians, from *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 88, italics mine.

“Continue to gather together, each and every one of you, collectively and individually by name, in grace, in one faith and one Jesus Christ, who physically was a descendant of David, who is Son of man and Son of God, in order that you may *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*.”³²

“Try to gather together more frequently to celebrate *God’s Eucharist* and to praise him.”³³

“At these meetings [worship] you should heed the *bishop and presbytery* attentively, and *break one loaf*, which is the *medicine of immortality*, and the antidote which words off death but yields continuous life in union with Jesus Christ.”³⁴

Letter to the Trallians: “For they [the deacons] *do not serve mere food and drink*, but minister to God’s Church.”³⁵

Letter to the Romans: “My Desire has been crucified and there burns in me no passion for material things. There is living water (Jn 4:10; 7:38) in me, which speaks and says inside me, ‘Come to the Father.’ I take no delight in corruptible food or in the dainties of this life. What I want is *God’s bread* (Jn 6:33), *which is the flesh of Christ*, who came from David’s life; and for drink I want *his blood*: an immortal love feast indeed!”³⁶

Letter to the Philadelphians: “Be careful, then, to observe a single *Eucharist*. For there is *one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ*, and *one cup of his blood that makes us one*, and *one altar*, just as there is *one bishop* along with the *presbytery* and the *deacons*, my fellow slaves. In that way whatever you do is in line with God’s will.”³⁷

Letter to the Smyrnaeans: “Now note well those who hold *heretical opinions* about the grace of Jesus Christ which came to us; not how *contrary they are to the mind of God*. They have no concern for love, none for the widow, none for the orphan, none for the oppressed, none for the prisoner or the one released, none for the hungry or thirsty. They abstain from the *Eucharist* and *prayer*, because *they refuse to acknowledge that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ*.”³⁸

Letter of St. Polycarp to the Philippians: 150 A.D.

Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna who died a martyr’s death by burning at a stake. He was instructed by St. John the Apostle.

³² Letter to the Ephesians, from *The Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 92-93, italics mine.

³³ Letter to the Ephesians, from *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 91, italics mine.

³⁴ Letter to the Ephesians, from *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 93, italics mine.

³⁵ Letter to the Trallians from *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 99.

³⁶ Letter to the Romans from *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 105, italics mine.

³⁷ Letter to the Philadelphians from *Early Christian Fathers*, pp. 108-109, italics mine.

³⁸ Letter to the Smyrnaeans from *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 112, italics mine.

Hierarchical Structure

The letter is addressed from “Polycarp and the *presbyters* with him to the church of God that sojourns at Philippi.”³⁹

Polycarp writes, “*deacons* must be blameless in the presence of his righteousness, as deacons of God and Christ and not of men.... The *presbyters*, for their part must be compassionate, merciful to all.”⁴⁰

Tradition⁴¹

“Everyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is an Antichrist... Let us, therefore, leave the foolishness and the false-teaching of the crowd, and turn back to the *word which was delivered to us in the beginning*.”⁴²

St. Papias: c. 130 A.D.

Papias was the bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor. Irenaeus states that he was a friend of Polycarp and a student of the Apostle John. Little is known about his life.

Tradition

“And then too, when anyone came along who had been a follower of the *presbyters*, I would inquire about the *presbyters*’ discourse: what was said by Andrew, or by Peter, or by Philip, or by Thomas or James, or by John or Matthew, or by any other of the Lord’s disciples; and what Aristion and the Presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord, say. *It did not seem to me that I could be so much profit from the contents of books as from a living and abiding voice.*”⁴³

St. Justin the Martyr: 148-155 A.D.

Justin was born in Palestine to pagan parents. He attached himself to various philosophical schools before he converted to Christianity. He was a prolific writer. In addition to his two Apologies, which are sometimes combined as one work, he composed the *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. In the *Dialogue* “the connection with the earlier

³⁹ *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 123, italics mine.

⁴⁰ *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 125 & 126, italics mine.

⁴¹ The eminent non-Catholic scholar Jaroslav Pelikan defines tradition as follows: “tradition means the handing down of Christian teaching during the course of the history of the church, but it also means that which was handed down” from *The Christian Tradition: a History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol. I: *The Emergence of Catholic Tradition* (100-600), p. 7. Tradition, then, is the oral revelation that Jesus gave to the apostles and handed on to the Church. It together with Sacred Scripture provides the content of the Christian faith.

⁴² William A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 74, p. 29, italics mine.

⁴³ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 94, p. 38, italics mine.

Christian tradition is evident.”⁴⁴ Justin was martyred with six companions between the years 163-167 A.D.⁴⁵

Eucharist

“After the president has given thanks, and all the people have shouted their assent, those whom we call deacons give to each one present to partake of the *Eucharistic bread* and wine and water; and to those who are absent they carry away a portion. We call this food *Eucharist*; and no one else is permitted to partake of it, except one who believes our teaching to be true and who has been washed in the washing which is for the remission of sins and for regeneration, and is thereby living as Christ has enjoined.”⁴⁶

St. Irenaeus: 180-190 A.D.

St. Irenaeus is the most important Christian voice in the second century. He was raised in Asia Minor, probably in the city of Smyrna. Von Campenhausen⁴⁷ observes that from his boyhood Irenaeus “came to know the genuine, unadulterated gospel, to which he remained faithful throughout his life.”⁴⁸ He became the bishop of Lyons in Gaul between 177-180 A.D. after the martyrdom of Pothinus his predecessor. Prior to his consecration as a bishop he was a respected presbyter. Not only do his ideas reflect the Christianity of the East and West, but Irenaeus is also an important link to St. John the apostle because he was taught by the glorious martyr Polycarp, who was John’s disciple.⁴⁹ He may also have been a pupil of Justin Martyr. His great work, *Against Heresies*,⁵⁰ was written to combat gnosticism. His minor work is the apologetic track called *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Teaching*.⁵¹

Papal Primacy

“But since it would be too long to enumerate in such a volume as this the successions of all the Churches, we shall confound all those who, in whatever manner, whether through self-satisfaction or vainglory, or through blindness and wicked opinion, assemble other than where it is proper, by pointing out here the successions of the bishops of the *greatest and most ancient Church* known at all, founded and organized at *Rome* by the two most glorious Apostles, Peter and Paul, that Church which has the *tradition and faith* which comes down to us after having been *announced to men by the Apostles*. For with *this Church*, because of its superior origin, *all Churches must agree*, that is, *all the faithful in*

⁴⁴ Hans von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Church*, p. 11.

⁴⁵ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, p. 50.

⁴⁶ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, “Letter to Florinus,” Vol. I, # 128, p. 55.

⁴⁷ Hans von Campenhausen, the former chair of ecclesiastical history at Heidelberg, is one of the world’s leading authorities on the thought and doctrines of the early Church.

⁴⁸ *The Fathers of the Church*, p. 17.

⁴⁹ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, “Letter to Florinus,” Vol. I, # 264, p. 106.

⁵⁰ The full title is *The Refutation and Overthrow of the Knowledge Falsely So Called*.

⁵¹ *Patrology*, Vol. I, pp. 287-294; *Early Christian Fathers*, pp. 343-354.

*the whole world; and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the Apostolic tradition.*⁵²

Hierarchical Structure of the Church

“And we are in a position to enumerate those who were instituted *bishops by the Apostles*, and their *successors* to our own times.”⁵³

“The true gnosis is the doctrine of the Apostles, and the ancient organization of the Church throughout the whole world, and the manifestation of the body of Christ according to the *successions of bishops*, by which *successions the bishops have handed down the Church* which is found everywhere; and the very complete tradition of the scriptures.”⁵⁴

“For all these [heretics] are of much later date than are the *bishops* to whom the *Apostles handed over the Churches*; and this fact I pointed out most carefully in the third book.”⁵⁵

Eucharist

“But what consistency is there in those who hold that the *bread over which thanks have been given is the Body of their Lord*, and the *cup His Blood*, if they do not acknowledge that He is the Son of the Creator of the world, that is, His word, through whom the wood bears fruit, and the fountains gush forth, and the earth gives first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain of the ear?”⁵⁶

“If the Lord were from other than the Father, how could He rightly take, bread, which is of the same creation as our own, and *confess it to be His Body*, and *affirm that the mixture in the cup is His blood*?”⁵⁷

“They are vain in every respect, who despise the entire dispensation of God, and deny the salvation of the body and spurn its regeneration, saying that it is not capable of immortality. If the body be not saved, then, in fact, neither did the Lord redeem us with His Blood; and neither is the cup of the *Eucharist the partaking of His Blood* nor is the *Bread which we break the partaking of his Body*. . . . *He has declared the cup*, a part of creation, *to be His own Blood*, from which He causes our blood to flow; and the bread, a part of creation, He has established *as His own Body*, from which He gives increase to our bodies. When, therefore, the mixed cup and the baked bread receives the Word of God and becomes *the Eucharist, the Body of Christ*. . . through the Wisdom of God, comes to the service of men, and receiving the Word of God, becomes the *Eucharist, which is the Body and Blood of Christ*.”⁵⁸

⁵² *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 210, p. 90, italics mine.

⁵³ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 209, p. 89, italics mine.

⁵⁴ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 242, p. 97, italics mine.

⁵⁵ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 257, p. 101, italics mine.

⁵⁶ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 234, p. 95, italics mine.

⁵⁷ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 240, p. 97, italics mine.

⁵⁸ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 249, p. 99, italics mine.

The Mass: a Sacrifice

“He taught the *new sacrifice* of the new covenant, of which Malachias, one of the twelve prophets, had signified beforehand: ‘You do not do My will,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and I will not accept a sacrifice at your hands. For from the rising of the sun to its setting My name is glorified among the gentiles, and in every place incense is offered to My name, and a pure sacrifice; for great is My name among the gentiles,’ says the Lord Almighty. By these words He makes it plain that the former people will cease to make offerings to God; but that in every place *sacrifice* will be offered to Him, and indeed, a pure one; for His name is glorified among the gentiles.”⁵⁹

“Sacrifice as such has not been reprobated. There were sacrifices then, sacrifices among the people; and *there are sacrifices now, sacrifices in the Church*. Only the kind has been changed; for now the sacrifice is offered not by slaves but by free men.”⁶⁰

Tradition

“For, while the languages of the world are diverse, nevertheless, the *authority of the tradition* is one and the same. Neither do the Churches among the Germans believe otherwise or have another *tradition*, nor do those among the Iberians, nor among the Celts, nor away in the East, nor in Egypt, nor in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world. But just as the sun, that creature of God, is one and the same throughout the whole world, so also *the preaching of the truth* shines everywhere and enlightens all men who desire to come to the knowledge of the truth.”⁶¹

“Every Church throughout the whole world has received this *tradition* from the Apostles.”⁶²

“It is possible, then, for everyone in every Church, who may wish to know the truth, to contemplate the *tradition of the Apostles* which has been made known throughout the whole world. And we are in a position to enumerate those who were instituted *bishops by the Apostles*, and their *successors* to our own times: men who neither knew nor taught anything like these heretics rave about. For if the Apostles had known hidden mysteries which they taught to the elite secretly and apart from the rest, they would have *handed them down* especially to those very ones to whom they were *committing* the self-same Churches. For surely they wished all those and their *successors* to be perfect and without reproach, to whom they *handed on their authority*.”⁶³

‘The blessed Apostles [Peter and Paul], having founded and built up the Church [of Rome], *they handed over the office of the episcopate* to Linus. Paul makes mention of

⁵⁹ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 232, p. 95, italics mine.

⁶⁰ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 233, p. 95, italics mine.

⁶¹ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. 1, # 192, p. 85, italics mine.

⁶² *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. 1, # 198, p. 86, italics mine.

⁶³ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. 1, # 209, p. 89, italics mine.

this Linus in the Epistle to Timothy (2 Tim 4:21). To him succeeded Anencletus; and after him, in the third place from the Apostles, Clement was chosen for the episcopate. He had seen the blessed Apostles and was acquainted with them. It might be said that he still heard the echoes of the preaching of the Apostles, and had their *tradition* before his eyes. And not only he, for there were many still remaining who had been *instructed by the Apostles*.

In the time of Clement, no small dissension having arisen among the brethren in Corinth, the Church in Rome sent a very strong letter to the Corinthians, exhorting them to peace and renewing their faith... To this Clement, Evaristus succeeded; and Alexander succeeded Evaristus. Then, sixth after the Apostles, Sixtus was appointed; after him, Thelesphorus who also was gloriously martyred. Then Hyginus; after him, Pious; and after him, Anicetus. Soter succeeded Anicetus, and now in the twelfth place after the Apostles, the lot of the episcopate has fallen to Eleutherus. In this order, and by the teaching of the *Apostles handed down* in the Church, the *preaching* of the truth has come down to us.”⁶⁴

“Polycarp, however, was instructed not only by the Apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also *appointed bishop* of the Church in Smyrna, *by the Apostles in Asia*.... He always *taught* those things which *he had learned from the Apostles*, and which the Church had *handed down*, and with which are true.”⁶⁵

“The path of those, however, who belong to the Church, goes around the whole world; for it has the *firm tradition of the Apostles*, enabling us to see that the faith of all is one and the same.”⁶⁶

Tertullian: 197-206 A.D.

Tertullian, Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, was born in Carthage of pagan parents. He became a skilled lawyer. After his conversion c. 193 A.D. he used his training to defend Christianity. St. Jerome states he was a priest, although this is disputed. His writings were composed between 197 and 220 A.D. They fall into three distinct periods: the Catholic period from 197-206 A.D.; the semi-Montanist period from 206-212 A.D.; and the Montanist period from 213-220 A.D. There is no heresy or schism called semi-Montanism. It simply means that during this period Tertullian was wavering. One can detect in his writings from this period marked rigorist tendencies and a mounting attitude of anticlericalism.⁶⁷ He was the first of the Latin authors. His most important work is the *Apology* written in 197 A.D.

Papal Primacy

“Peter alone [among the Apostles] do I find married, and through mention of his mother-in-law. I presume he was a monogamist; for the *Church, built upon him*, would for the

⁶⁴ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. 1, # 211, p. 90, italics mine.

⁶⁵ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. 1, # 212, p. 90, italics mine.

⁶⁶ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 257, p. 101, italics mine.

⁶⁷ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, p. 111.

future appoint to every degree of orders none but monogamists. As for the rest, since I do not find them married, I must presume they were either eunuchs or continent.”⁶⁸

“I now inquire into your opinion, to see whence you usurp this right for the Church. Do you presume, because the Lord said to Peter, ‘On this rock I will build my Church, I have given you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,’ or ‘whatever you shall have bound or loosed on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven,’ that the power of binding and loosing has thereby been handed on to you, that is, to every Church akin to Peter? On *you*, He says, I will build my Church; and I will give *you* the Keys, not the Church; and whatever *you* shall have bound or *you* shall have loosed; not what they shall have bound or they shall have loosed.”⁶⁹

Hierarchical Structure of the Church

“Moreover, if there be any [heresies] bold enough to plant themselves in the midst of the apostolic age, so that they might seem to have been handed down by the Apostles because they were from the time of the Apostles, we can say to them; let them show the origins of their Churches, let them unroll the order of their *bishops*, running down in *succession from the beginning*, so that their first *bishop* shall have for author and predecessor some one of the Apostles or of the apostolic men who continued steadfast with the Apostles. For this is the way in which the apostolic Churches transmit their list: like the Church of the Smyrnaeans, which records that *Polycarp was placed there by John*; like the Church of the Romans where *Clement was ordained by Peter*.”⁷⁰

Eucharist

“The flesh, then, is washed, so that the soul may be made clean. The flesh is anointed, so that the soul may be dedicated to holiness. The flesh is signed, so that the soul too may be fortified. The flesh is shaded by the imposition of hands, so that the soul too may be illuminated by the Spirit. The flesh feeds on the *Body and Blood of Christ*, so that the soul too may fatten on God. They cannot, then, be separated in their reward, when they are united in their works.”⁷¹

“The *Sacrament of the Eucharist*, which the Lord commanded to be taken at meal times and by all, we take even before daybreak in congregations, but from the hand of none others except the presidents. . . . We take anxious care lest something of our Cup or Bread should fall upon the ground.”⁷²

Sacrifice of the Mass

⁶⁸ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 381, p. 158, italics mine.

⁶⁹ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 387, p. 160.

⁷⁰ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 296, pp. 121-122, italics mine.

⁷¹ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 362, p. 149, italics mine.

⁷² *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 367, p. 151, italics mine.

“How shall we suffice for telling of that happiness of that marriage which the Church arranges, which the *sacrifice* strengthens, on which the blessing sets a seal, which the angels proclaim, and which has the Father’s approval?”⁷³

“We offer *sacrifices* for the dead on their birthday anniversaries.”⁷⁴

“Indeed, she [the widow] prays for his [her deceased husband] soul and asks that he may, while waiting, find rest; and that he may share in the first resurrection. And each year on the anniversary of his death, she offers the *sacrifice*.”⁷⁵

Tradition

“Wherever it shall be clear that the truth of the Christian discipline and faith are present, there also will be found the truth of the Scriptures and of their explanation, and of *all the Christian traditions*.”⁷⁶

“From this, then we draw up our demurrer: if the Lord Jesus Christ sent the Apostles to *preach*, no others ought to be received except those appointed by Christ.... And indeed, every doctrine must be prejudged as false, if it smells of anything contrary to the truth of the Churches and of the Apostles of Christ and God. It remains, then for us to demonstrate whether this doctrine of ours, of which we gave the rule above, accords with the *tradition of the Apostles*, in which case all other doctrines proceed from falsehood.”⁷⁷

St. Clement of Alexandria: d. 215 A.D.

St. Clement was an early Greek teacher and theologian who headed the famous catechetical school of Alexandria about 190 A.D. Athens was probably the starting-point of his journeyings and was his birthplace. He was already well known as a Christian writer before the days of Pope Victor (188-199). Clement has had no notable influence on the course of theology beyond his personal influence on the young Origen. His writings were referred to by Hippolytus, by Arnobius, and by Theodoret of Cyrus. St. Jerome admired his learning.⁷⁸

Papal Primacy

“Nor does the kingdom of heaven belong to the sleeping and the lazy; rather, the violent take it by force.... On hearing these words, the blessed Peter, *the chosen, the pre-eminent, the first among the disciples*, for who alone with Himself, the Savior paid the tribute, quickly grasped and understood their meaning. And what does he say? ‘Behold, we have left all and have followed you.’”⁷⁹

⁷³ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 320, p. 133, italics mine.

⁷⁴ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 367, p. 151, italics mine.

⁷⁵ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 382, p. 159, italics mine.

⁷⁶ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 291, p. 120, italics mine.

⁷⁷ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 293, pp. 120-121, italics mine.

⁷⁸ Francis P. Havey, “St. Clement of Alexandria,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. IV, Online Edition.

⁷⁹ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 436, p. 187, italics mine

Hierarchical Structure of the Church

“Even here in the Church the gradations of *bishops, presbyters, and deacons* happen to be imitations, in my opinion, of the angelic glory and of that arrangement which, the Scriptures say, awaits those who have followed in the footsteps of the Apostles, and who have lived in perfect righteousness according to the Gospel.”⁸⁰

Eucharist

“The Word is everything to a child: both Father and Mother, both Instructor and Nurse. ‘Eat My Flesh.’ The Lord supplies us with these intimate nutriment. He delivers over *His Flesh*, and *pours out His Blood*; and nothing is lacking for the growth of His children. O incredible mystery!”⁸¹

“The Blood of the Lord, indeed, is twofold. There is the corporeal Blood, by which we are redeemed from corruption; and His *spiritual Blood*, that with which we are anointed. That is to say, to *drink the blood of Jesus is to share in His immortality*. The strength of the Word is the Spirit, just as the blood is the strength of the body. Similarly, as wine is blended with water, so is the Spirit with man. The one, the Watered Wine, nourishes in faith, while the other, the Spirit, leads us on the immortality. The union of both, however, - of the *drink* and of the *Word*, - is called the *Eucharist*, a praiseworthy and excellent gift. Those who partake of it in faith are sanctified in body and in soul.”⁸²

“On the other hand, hear the Savior: ‘I am He that feeds you. I give *Myself as Bread*, of which he that has tasted experiences death no more; and I supply daily *the Drink of immortality*’.”⁸³

St. Hippolytus of Rome: 215-225 A.D.

Hippolytus was a priest, although both Eusebius and St. Jerome believed he was also a bishop. He probably met Irenaeus in Rome. His tendency to excessive rigorism prompted a break with the Catholic Church over the election of Callistus as Pope. He was then elected antipope by his small band of followers. He unjustly accused Pope Callistus of first falling into the heresy of Theodotus and then that of Sabellius. This break with the Catholic Church continued through the pontificates of Urban and Pontius, who followed Callistus. However, Hippolytus was reconciled with the Church during the pontificate of Pope Pontianus, both of whom were martyred. Hippolytus is considered the most important writer of the Roman Church in the pre-Constantinian era.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 427, p. 184, italics mine.

⁸¹ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 408, p. 178, italics mine.

⁸² *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 436a, p. 187, italics mine.

⁸³ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 410, p. 179, italics mine.

⁸⁴ J.P. Kirsch, translated by Judy Levandoski, “St. Hippolytus of Rome,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VII, Online Edition.

Hierarchical Structure of the Church

“Let the *bishop be ordained* after he has been chosen by all the people.... All giving assent the *bishops shall impose hands on him*, and the presbytery shall stand by in silence. Then one of the *bishops present shall*, at the request of all, *impose his hand* on the one who is *being ordained bishop*, and shall pray thus, saying:... Pour forth now that power which comes from you, from your Royal Spirit, which you gave to your Beloved Son Jesus Christ and which He bestowed upon His holy Apostles, who established in every place the Church of your sanctification for the glory and unceasing praise of your name. You know the hearts of all, grant to this your servant, whom you have chosen for the *episcopate*, to feed your holy flock and to serve without blame as *your high priest*, ministering night and day *to propitiate unceasingly* before your face; and to offer to you the gifts of your holy Church; and by the Spirit of the *high-priesthood* to have the authority to forgive sins, in accord with your command; and to please you in meekness and purity of heart, offering to you an odor of sweetness; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom be glory, might, and honor to you, to the Father and the Son with the Holy Spirit, both now and through the ages of ages. Amen.”⁸⁵

“When a *presbyter* is to be *ordained*, the *bishop* shall impose his hand upon his head, while the *presbyters* touch the one to be *ordained*; and the *bishop* shall speak after the fashion of those things said above, where we prescribed what was to be said in the *ordination of a bishop*.”⁸⁶

“When a *deacon* is to be *ordained* he is chosen after the fashion of those things said above, the *bishop* alone in like manner imposing his hands upon him as we have prescribed.”⁸⁷

“For this reason, then, the *bishop alone* shall *ordain a deacon*. On a *presbyter*, however, let the *presbyters* impose their hands because of the common and like Spirit of the clergy. Even so, the *presbyter* has only the power to receive, and has not the power to give. That is why a *presbyter does not ordain the clergy*; for at the *ordaining of a presbyter*, he but seals while the *bishop ordains*.”⁸⁸

Eucharist

“and [to] show forth His resurrection, [Jesus] took bread and gave thanks to you [the Father], saying: ‘Take, eat: this is My Body, which is broken for you.’ Likewise with the cup too, saying: ‘This is My Blood, which is poured out for you. Whenever you do this, you do it in my memory.’ Remembering, therefore, His death and resurrection, we *offer to you* the bread and the cup, giving thanks to you, because of your having accounted us as worthy to stand before you and *minister to you*.”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, #394a, pp. 166-167, italics mine.

⁸⁶ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, #394b, p. 167, italics mine.

⁸⁷ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, #394c, p. 168, italics mine.

⁸⁸ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, #394c, p. 168, italics mine.

⁸⁹ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, #394a, p. 167, italics mine.

“And then the deacons immediately bring the *oblation* to the bishop; and he *eucharists* the bread into the *antitype of the Body of Christ*; and the cup of mixed wine, for an *antitype of the Blood*, which was shed for all who believe in Him. . . . Indeed, the bishop shall explain the reason for all these things to those who partake. Breaking the Bread into individual particles which he then distributes, he shall say: ‘*Heavenly Bread in Christ Jesus!*’”⁹⁰

Origen: 185-254 A.D.

Born in 185, Origen was barely seventeen when a bloody persecution of the Church broke out. Leonides, his father, was cast into prison. Origen would have joined his father, but was prevented when his mother hid his clothes. When Leonides won the martyr's crown his fortune was confiscated by the imperial authorities. Origen assumed the responsibility to support himself, his mother, and his six younger brothers. He accomplished this by becoming a teacher. He eventually assumed the direction of the catechetical school of Alexandria. Origen's school, which was frequented by pagans, soon became a nursery of neophytes, confessors, and martyrs. He mastered Hebrew, and became the most notable biblical scholar after St. Jerome. Eventually, he was ordained to the priesthood. During the persecution of Decius (250 A.D.) Origen was imprisoned and barbarously tortured, but his courage was unshaken. He survived the ordeal, but he died in 253 or 254 at the age of sixty-nine, probably from the results of the sufferings endured during the persecution. Origen's teachings and writings were widely influential.⁹¹

Papal Primacy

“*Peter, upon whom is built the Church of Christ*, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail, left only one Epistle of acknowledged genuinity. Let us concede also a second, which, however, is doubtful.”⁹²

“Look at the *great foundation of the Church*, that *most solid of rocks, upon whom Christ built the Church!* And what does the Lord say to Him? ‘O you of little faith,’ He says, ‘why did you doubt (Lk 11:41)’!”⁹³

Hierarchical Structure of the Church

“In addition to these there is also a seventh, albeit hard and laborious: the *remission of sins through penance*, when the sinner washes his pillow in tears, when his tears are day and night his nourishment, and *when he does not shrink from declaring his sins to a priest* of the Lord and from seeking medicine, after the manner of him who says, ‘I said,

⁹⁰ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, #394i, p. 170, italics mine

⁹¹ F. Prat, transcribed by Anthony A. Killeen, “Origen and Origenism,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XI, Online Edition.

⁹² *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 479a, p. 202, italics mine. This quotation indicates the unsettled canon of the New Testament in the early third century.

⁹³ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 489, p. 205, italics mine.

“To the Lord I will accuse myself of my iniquity,” and you forgave the disloyalty of my heart.’ In this way there is fulfilled that too, which the Apostle James says: ‘If, then, there is anyone sick, let him call the *presbyters of the Church*, and let them impose hands upon him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and if he be in sins, *they shall be forgiven him.*”⁹⁴

Eucharist

“I wish to admonish you with examples from our religion. You are accustomed to take part in the *divine mysteries*, so you know how, when you have received the *Body of the Lord*, you reverently exercise every care lest a particle of it fall, and lest anything of the *consecrated gift* perish. You account yourself guilty, and rightly do you so believe, if any of it be lost through negligence. But if you observe such caution in keeping *His Body*, and properly so, how is it that you think neglecting the word of God a lesser crime than neglecting His Body?”⁹⁵

“Formerly there was Baptism, in an obscure way, in the cloud and in the sea; now however, in full view, there is regeneration in water and in the Holy Spirit. Formerly, in an obscure way, there was manna for food; now, however, in full view, there is the *true food*, the *Flesh of the Word of God*, as He Himself says: ‘*My Flesh is truly food, and My Blood is truly drink.*’”⁹⁶

“That which is sanctified through the word of God and prayer does not of its very nature sanctify him who avails himself of it. If this were the case, it would sanctify even him that eats unworthily of the *Bread of the Lord*, and no one would become infirm or weak on account of this food, nor would they fall asleep. Paul indicated something of this kind in saying, ‘This is why many among you are infirm and weak, and why many sleep’ (1 Cor 11:30). In regard to this *Bread of the Lord*, therefore, there is advantage to him who avails himself of it, when, with undefiled mind and pure conscience, he partakes of the *Bread*.... These things, indeed, are said of the typical and symbolic body; but much more might be said about the Word himself, who became flesh and *true food*, of which he that eats shall surely live forever, no wicked person being able to eat it. For if it were possible for one who continues in wickedness to eat of *Him who became flesh, the Word* and the *Living Bread*, it would not have been written that everyone who eats of this *Bread* shall live forever.”⁹⁷

Tradition

“Although there are many who believe that they themselves hold to the teachings of Christ, there are yet some among them who think differently from their predecessors. The teaching of the Church has indeed *been handed down* through an *order of succession from the Apostles*, and remains in the Churches even to the present time. That alone is to

⁹⁴ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 493, p. 207, italics mine.

⁹⁵ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 490, p. 205, italics mine.

⁹⁶ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 491, p. 206, italics mine.

⁹⁷ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 504, pp. 210-211, italics mine.

be believed as the truth which is in no way at variance *with ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition.*”⁹⁸

“The Church received *from the Apostles* the *tradition* of giving Baptism even to infants. For the Apostles, to whom were committed the secrets of divine mysteries, knew that there is in everyone the innate stains of sin, which must be washed away through water and the Spirit.”⁹⁹

St. Cyprian of Carthage: d. 258 A.D.

The date of this martyr's birth is not known. His baptism probably took place about 246 A.D. In January, 250 A.D. the emperor Decius published an edict against Christians, which initiated a virulent persecution. As a result many Christians abandoned their faith. Subsequently, Cyprian was captured during the persecution of the Emperor Valerian. Cyprian declared himself a Christian and a bishop. In August, 258, Cyprian learned that Pope Sixtus had been put to death together with four of his deacons. Cyprian was tried in Carthage and sentenced to death by beheading. He was the first Bishop of Carthage to obtain the crown of martyrdom. Until the works of Jerome and Augustine, Cyprian's writings had no rivals in the West.¹⁰⁰

Papal Primacy

“The Lord says to *Peter*: ‘I say to you,’ He says, ‘that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it. And to you I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatever things you bind on earth shall be bound also in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, they shall be loosed also in heaven’ (Mt 16:18-19). And again He says to him after His resurrection: ‘Feed my sheep (Jn21:17).’ *On him He builds the Church, and to him He gives the command to feed the sheep; and although He assigns a like power to all the Apostles, yet He founded a single chair, and He established by His own authority a source and an intrinsic reason for that unity. Indeed, the others were that also which Peter was; but a primacy is given to Peter, whereby it is made clear that there is but one Church and one chair. So too, all are shepherds, and the flock is shown to be one, fed by all the Apostles in single-minded accord. If someone does not hold fast to this unity of Peter, can he imagine that he still holds the faith? If he desert the chair of Peter upon whom the Church was built, can he still be confident that he is in the Church?*”¹⁰¹

“We have learned from Crementius, the subdeacon who came to us from you, that the blessed *Pope Cyprian* has withdrawn, for the reason specified, ‘which, indeed, he might

⁹⁸ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 443, p. 190, italics mine.

⁹⁹ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 501, p. 209, italics mine.

¹⁰⁰ John Chapman, transcribed by Michael T. Barrett, “St. Cyprian of Carthage,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. IV, Online Edition.

¹⁰¹ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 555-556, pp. 220-221, italics mine.

rightly do, especially since he is a distinguished person, and in view of the impending conflict’.”¹⁰²

“The presbyters and deacons abiding in Rome, to *Pope Cyprian*: greeting... We hope, most blessed and most glorious *Pope*, that you are well and that you are always mindful of us to the Lord.”¹⁰³

“Our Lord, whose commands we ought to fear and observe, says in the Gospel, by way of assigning the *episcopal dignity and settling the plan of His Church*: ‘I say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it. And to you I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatever things you bind on earth will be bound also in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, will be loosed also in heaven’ (Mt 16:18-19).”¹⁰⁴

“They who have not peace themselves now offer peace to others. They who have withdrawn from the Church promise to lead back and to recall the lapsed to the Church. There is one God and one Christ, and one Church, and *one Chair founded on Peter by the word of the Lord*. It is not possible to setup another *altar* or for there to be another *priesthood* besides that *one altar* and that *one priesthood*. Whoever has gathered elsewhere is scattering.”¹⁰⁵

“With a *false bishop* appointed for themselves by heretics, they dare even to set sail and carry letters from schismatics and blasphemers to the *chair of Peter and to the principal Church*, in which *sacerdotal unity has its source*; nor did they take thought that these are Romans, whose faith was praised by the preaching Apostle, and among whom it is not possible for perfidy to have entrance.”¹⁰⁶

“And the Lord too, in the Gospel, when the disciples abandoned Him while He was speaking, turned to the twelve and said, ‘And do you wish to go away?’ Peter answered Him, saying, ‘Lord to whom shall we go? You have the word of eternal life: and we believe and know that you are the Son of the Living God’ (Jn 6:68-70). There speaks *Peter, upon whom the Church would be built*, teaching in the name of the Church and showing that even if a stubborn and proud multitude withdraws because it does not wish to obey, yet the Church does not withdraw from Christ. *The people joined to the priest and the flock clinging to their shepherd are the Church*.”¹⁰⁷

Hierarchical Structure of the Church

¹⁰² *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 568a, p. 227, italics mine.

¹⁰³ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 570b, p. 228, italics mine.

¹⁰⁴ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 571, p. 229, italics mine.

¹⁰⁵ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 573, p. 229, italics mine.

¹⁰⁶ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 580, p. 232, italics mine.

¹⁰⁷ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 587, pp. 233-234, italics mine.

“I beseech you, brethren, let everyone who has sinned *confess his sin* while he is still in this world, while his *confession* is still admissible, while satisfaction and remission made through the *priests* are pleasing before the Lord.”¹⁰⁸

“Most especially must we *bishops*, who exercise *authority in the Church*, hold firmly and insist upon this unity, whereby we may demonstrate also that the *episcopate itself is one and undivided*. Let no one mislead the brotherhood with a lie, let no one corrupt the faith by a faithless perversion of the truth. *The episcopate is one*, of which *each bishop holds his part within the undivided structure*. *The Church also is one*, however widely she has spread among the multitude through her fruitful increase... The Church is bathed in the light of the Lord, and pours her rays over the whole world; but it is one light that is spread everywhere, and *the unity of her structure is undivided*.”¹⁰⁹

“Although for lesser sins it is required that sinners do penance for a just time, after which, according to the rule of discipline, they may *come to confession* and, through the imposition of hands by the *bishop and clergy*, may receive the right of communication, now, in an unpropitious time and while the persecution continues, when peace is not yet restored to the Church itself, they are being admitted to communication, and the offering is made in their name; and, not yet having made *a confession of sin*, not yet having hands imposed upon them by the *bishop and the clergy*, the *Eucharist* is given to them, in spite of what is written: ‘Whoever shall eat the Bread or drink the Cup of the Lord unworthily, will be guilty of the Body and the Blood of the Lord’ (1 Cor 11:27).”¹¹⁰

“From that time the *ordination of bishops* and the plan of the Church flows on through the changes of times and *successions*; for *the Church is founded upon the bishops*, and every act of the Church is controlled by these same rulers. Since *this has indeed been established by divine law*, I marvel at the rash boldness of certain persons who have desired to write to me as if they were writing their letters in the name of the Church, ‘since *the Church is established upon the bishop and upon the clergy* and upon all who stand firm in the faith.’”¹¹¹

“And indeed, among our predecessors, some of the *bishops* here in our province did not think that peace should be extended to adulterers; and in the matter of adultery they completely shut off any opportunity for penance. They did not, however, withdraw from the *college of their fellow-bishops*; not did they break the unity of the Catholic church by their continuing the severity of their censure, as were the case, if because peace was given by some to adulterers, he that did not give it should be separated from the Church. While the bond of concord remains the *indivisible sacrament of the Catholic Church* continues, each *bishop* disposes and directs his own work as one who must give an account of his administration to the Lord.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 553, p. 219, italics mine.

¹⁰⁹ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 555-556, p. 221, italics mine.

¹¹⁰ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 569, pp. 227-228, italics mine.

¹¹¹ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 571, p. 229, italics mine.

¹¹² *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 576b, pp. 230-231, italics mine.

“You ought to know, then, that a *bishop is in the Church and the Church in the bishop*; and *if someone is not with the bishop, he is not in the Church*. They vainly flatter themselves who creep up, and not having peace with the *priests of God*, believing that they are secretly in communion with certain individuals. For the Church, which is One and Catholic, is not split nor divided, but is indeed *united and joined by the cement of priests* who adhere one to another.”¹¹³

Eucharist

“The Apostle likewise bears witness and says: ‘You cannot drink the *cup of the Lord* and the cup of devils. You cannot be a *communicant* at the *table of the Lord* and of the table of devils’ (1 Cor 10:21). And again he threatens the stubborn and perverse and denounces then, saying: ‘Whoever eats the Bread and drinks the Cup of the Lord unworthily, will be guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord’ (1 Cor 11:27). But they spurn and despise all these warnings; and before their sins are expiated, before they have made a *confession* of their crime, before their conscience has been *purged in the ceremony at the hand of the priest*, before the offense against an angry and threatening Lord has been appeased, they do violence to *His Body and Blood*; and with their hands and mouth they sin against the Lord more than when they denied Him.”¹¹⁴

“As the prayer continues, we ask and say, ‘Give us this day our daily bread,’... And ask that this bread be given us daily, so that we who are in Christ and daily receive the *Eucharist* as the *food of salvation*, may not, by falling into some more grievous sin and then in abstaining from *communicating*, be withheld from the *heavenly Bread*, and be separated from *Christ’s Body*... He Himself warns us, saying ‘Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you (Jn 6:54).’ Therefore do we ask that our *Bread, which is Christ*, be given to us daily, so that we who abide and live in Christ may not withdraw from His sanctification and from *His Body*.”¹¹⁵

“Although you sent me a letter in which you ask that consideration be given your desire that, after the persecution is over and we begin to gather together again and to meet together with the *clergy*, peace be then extended to the lapsed, those [aforementioned *presbyters*] have dared, - contrary to the law of the gospel, contrary even to your respectful petition, before penance has been done, before a *confession* of the most grave an extremest sin has been made, before a hand has been imposed in penance by the *bishop and the clergy*, - to offer on their behalf and to give them the *Eucharist*; that is, to profane the holy *Body of the Lord*, in spite of what is written: ‘Whoever shall eat the Bread and drink the Cup of the Lord unworthily, will be guilty of the Body and the Blood of the Lord’ (1 Co 11:27).”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 587, p. 234, italics mine.

¹¹⁴ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 551, p. 218, italics mine.

¹¹⁵ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 559, p. 223, italics mine.

¹¹⁶ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 568b, p. 227, italics mine.

“We find that the cup which the Lord offered was mixed; and that what was wine, He called *Blood*. From this it is apparent that the *Blood of Christ* is not offered if there is no wine in the cup.”¹¹⁷

Sacrifice of the Mass

“It came about through ignorance, therefore, that the mother brought the child into our presence *when we were offering the Sacrifice*.”¹¹⁸

“The order certainly is that which comes from his sacrifice and which comes down from it: because Melchisedech was a priest of the Most High God; because he offered bread; and because he blessed Abraham. And who is more a priest of the Most High God than our Lord Jesus Christ, who, *when He offered sacrifice* to God the Father, offered the very same which Melchisedech had offered, namely *bread and wine, which is in fact His Body and Blood!*”¹¹⁹

“If Christ Jesus, our Lord and God, is Himself the High Priest of God the Father; and if he offered Himself as a *sacrifice* to the Father; and if He commanded that this be done in commemoration of Himself – then certainly the *priest*, who imitates that which Christ did, *truly functions in the place of Christ*.”¹²⁰

Eusebius Pamphilus of Caesarea: 263-340 A.D.

Eusebius, who is called the father of ecclesiastical history, was born in Caesarea in Palestine around the years 263 A.D. Eusebius studied under the presbyter Pamphilus who continued the scholarly tradition of Origen. In 313 A.D. he was ordained bishop of Caesarea. His greatest work was the *History of the Church*, written between 300 and 325 A.D.

Papal Primacy

“In the same reign of Claudius [41-54 A.D.], the all-good and gracious providence which watches over all things guided *Peter, the great and mighty one among the Apostles*, who, because of his virtue, was *the spokesman for all the others*, to Rome.”¹²¹

“*Peter*, however, seems to have preached to the Jews in the diaspora in the Pontus and in Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and in Asia; and at last, *having come to Rome*, he was crucified head downwards, the manner in which he himself had thought it fitting to suffer.”¹²²

¹¹⁷ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 582, p. 232, italics mine.

¹¹⁸ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 552a, p. 218, italics mine.

¹¹⁹ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 581, p. 232, italics mine.

¹²⁰ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 584, pp. 232-233, italics mine.

¹²¹ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 651dd, p. 292, italics mine.

¹²² *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 652a, p. 292, italics mine.

Hierarchical Structure of the Church

“After the martyrdom of Paul and Peter, *Linus was the first appointed to the episcopacy of the Church at Rome*. Paul, writing from Rome to Timothy, mentions him in the salutation at the end of the Epistle (2 Tim 4:21).”¹²³

Eucharist

“Inasmuch as [Melchisedech], a priest of the pagans, never was known to offer flesh in his sacrifices, but only wine and bread; and inasmuch as he blessed Abraham, he is surely by this token our first Lord and Savior – He from whom all the *priests* sent out to all peoples *offer a spiritual sacrifice* in accord with *ecclesiastical regulations* representing by wine and bread *the mysteries of His Body and of His saving Blood*.”¹²⁴

Sacrifice of the Mass

“When, I say, all this is found to be in accord with the testimony of the Prophets, and when we have a *daily celebrating of the memory of His Body and of His Blood*, regarded as worthy of worship and as *a sacrifice* more sublime than those of antiquity, then certainly we no longer think that it could be in accord with the dictates of religion to fall back into those first and weak foreshadowings, which are symbols and images but which do not embrace the same truth.”¹²⁵

Epilogue

The prejudice against Catholics is so great in many quarters that some Protestants may suspect that the passages quoted here were selected out of context to give them a meaning what they do not have in their context. Therefore, I invite the skeptical reader to do his own research as the quotations given here are clearly identified in sources that are readily available. Furthermore, the conclusions of highly respected non-Catholic scholars who spent many years studying the writings of the Fathers are cited below.

Papal Authority and the Hierarchical Structure of the Church

James McCarthy states: “The authority of the Roman Catholic hierarchy rests upon three beliefs: Christ made Peter the head of the apostles and the universal church; the apostles appointed bishops as their successors; the Pope, as the Bishop of Rome, is Peter’s successor.” Then he states: “None of these claims, however, can be established from Scripture.”¹²⁶

¹²³ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 652b, pp. 292-293, italics mine.

¹²⁴ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 671, pp. 298, italics mine.

¹²⁵ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, # 664, pp. 297, italics mine.

¹²⁶ James G. McCarthy, *The Gospel According to Rome*, p. 237.

This is not the place to argue the Biblical basis for the claims of the Catholic Church. However, it is historically undeniable that the Christians of the first three centuries held these beliefs.

Just considering the Christian priesthood, Pelikan affirms: “there is considerable support in the teaching of the second-and third-century fathers: the distinction between the hierarchical priesthood and the priesthood of all believers. Already in Clement of Rome and in the Didache the attributes of the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament were being applied to the ministers of the church.”¹²⁷

Citations from the first three centuries of the Christian era clearly indicate Papal primacy and a hierarchical structure in the Church consisting of bishops, priests and deacons. Furthermore, these early Christians affirmed that these offices were either established by Christ Himself or the apostles. Thus Jaroslav Pelikan concluded: “The unity of the church, like its holiness was to be found in the bishops in their unity with one another, affirmed by the words of Jesus to Peter in Mathew 16:18-19.”¹²⁸

Eucharist

Most Protestants reject the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. If the Eucharist is considered at all, it is depicted as a mere symbol. This rejection of the Real Presence flies in the face of the passages quoted above and the conclusions of highly respected non-Catholic specialists who have extensively examined the writings of the Church Fathers.

Pelikan’s research verifies that the doctrine of the Real Presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist was unchallenged until the ninth century.¹²⁹ However, rejection of the Real Presence did not blossom into a major heresy until it was denied by Zwingli and Calvin in the sixteenth century.

The non-Catholic scholar, J. N. D. Kelly¹³⁰ supports Pelikan’s conclusions based on his examination of the evidence in the Patristic writings. “In the third century the early Christian identification of the eucharistic bread and wine with the Lord’s body and blood continued unchanged, although a difference of approach can be detected.”¹³¹ Focusing on the later doctrine of the Eucharist Kelly adds: “Eucharistic teaching, it should be understood at the outset, was in general unquestioningly realist, i.e. he consecrated bread and wine were taken to be, and were treated and designated as, the Savior’s body and blood.”¹³²

¹²⁷ *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol 1, p. 160.

¹²⁸ *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol 1, p. 159.

¹²⁹ *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol 1, p. 166.

¹³⁰ Kelly was the Principal of St. Edmund Hall, Oxford, England. He is acknowledged internationally as an authority on patristic Christian teaching. His work, *Early Christian Doctrines*, is used as a text in Protestant seminaries.

¹³¹ *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 221.

¹³² *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 440

J. de Watteville attests: “It is undeniable ... that the writings of the first centuries present the Eucharist as a sacrificial rite.”¹³³ Regin Prenter, a Lutheran scholar refers to the Eucharist as “the sacrificial meal of fulfillment.... In this sense we must insist, not only that the Eucharist is a true sacrifice, but even that it is the eternal presence of the sacrifice of Calvary in the Church.... *The body and blood really present are nothing else than the body and blood which were offered on Calvary....* The miracle is that the sacrifice of Calvary has not been past, but remains eternally present....”¹³⁴ The Baptist scholar, Neville Clarke, arguing for “sacrifice” and “communion,” writes that the “altar and table are inevitable and necessarily one.”¹³⁵

The belief in the Real Presence was so widely held in the early Church that there are no citations from the Fathers that deny Jesus’ true presence in the Eucharist. The Oxford scholar, Darwell Stone, corroborates the conclusions of Pelikan and Kelly.¹³⁶ Stone declares: “Throughout the writings of the Fathers there is unbroken agreement that the consecrated bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ, and that the Eucharist is a sacrifice.”¹³⁷

It is true that the Church Fathers sometimes used symbolic language to express the reality of Jesus’ presence in the Eucharist. However, as Kelly explains: “It must not be supposed, of course, that this ‘symbolical’ language implied that the bread and wine were regarded as mere pointers to, or tokens of, absent realities. Rather were they accepted as signs of realities which were somehow *actually present* through apprehended by faith alone.”¹³⁸

Sacrifice of the Mass

Protestants almost universally reject the idea of Christian sacrifice. Yet, it was a common belief in the first three centuries of Christianity. Thus Kelly concluded: “The eucharist was also, of course, the great act of worship of Christians, their sacrifice. The writers and liturgies of the period are unanimous in recognizing it as such.”¹³⁹

Tradition

Pelikan points out that “in the ante-Nicene Church...there was no notion of *sola Scriptura*, but neither was there a doctrine of *traditio sola*.”¹⁴⁰ He observes further:

¹³³ *Not By Bread Alone*, p. 421 citing *Le Sacrifice dans les Textes eucharistiques des premiers siècles*, p. 199; quoted in *Sin, Redemption and Sacrifice* by Lyonnet and Sabourin, p. 190.

¹³⁴ *Not By Bread Alone*, p. 421 taken from Michael Davies, *Liturgical Shipwreck* quoting Regin Prenter’s *Skabelse og Genloesning*, 2nd edition, pp. 531-533 (emphasis mine).

¹³⁵ *Not By Bread Alone*, p. 421 found in *Liturgical Renewal in the Christian Churches* edited by Michael Taylor, “Word and Sacrament in Protestant Worship,” by Richardson, pp. 48-50 (emphasis mine).

¹³⁶ *The Holy Communion*, p. 37 from *The Oxford Library of Practical Theology*.

¹³⁷ *The Holy Communion*, p. 37. Stone supports the same conclusion in his monumental two-volume study of this subject in the writings of the Church Fathers: *A History of the Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*.

¹³⁸ *Early Christian Doctrine*, pp. 441-442, emphasis mine.

¹³⁹ *Early Christian Doctrine*, p. 214.

¹⁴⁰ *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol 1, p. 115.

“Proponents of the theory that tradition was an independent source of revelation minimized the fundamentally exegetical content of tradition which had served to define tradition and its place in the specification of apostolic continuity. The supporters of the sole authority of Scripture, arguing from radical hermeneutical premises to conservative dogmatic conclusions, overlooked the function of tradition in securing what they regarded as the correct exegesis of Scripture against heretical alternatives.”¹⁴¹

Even the apostolic Church had Scriptures, the Old Testament. However, the critical issue was the oral teaching of the apostles that was handed on to the Church. “There is no reason to infer, however, that the primitive Church regarded the apostolic testimony as confined to written documents emanating from, or attributed to, the apostles. Logically, as it must have done chronologically, the testimony stood prior to the documents, and it would be more correct to say that the latter were valued precisely because they were held to enshrine the former.”¹⁴²

Conclusion

This study began with the purpose of examining the writings of the first three centuries, that pristine period Protestants allege is the be found the untainted Christianity of the apostles before it was corrupted by the Roman Catholic Church beginning in the fourth century. The historical reality, however, paints a very different picture. In the leadership and structure of the Church, in its belief in Jesus’ Real Presence in the Eucharist and its sacrificial liturgy, and in its reliance on Apostolic Tradition, provides overwhelming evidence that the Christianity of the first three centuries is the same as the Roman Catholic Church in the twenty-first century. Indeed, there is nothing in the Christianity of the first three centuries that resembles the core doctrines of Protestantism, namely, the rejection of Papal primacy, the hierarchical structure of the Church established by the apostles, the Real Presence, the Sacramental system, and the belief in faith alone, *sola fide*. As to the early Church’s belief in *sola scriptura*, it was non-existent!

There is only one Christian Church that can trace both its existence and its beliefs back to the apostles. That Church is the Roman Catholic Church.

April 10, 2005

¹⁴¹ *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol 1, p. 119.

¹⁴² *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 33.