

Back to the First Century

by Dennis Lange

Irenaeus (about 135 to 200 AD) was an early Christian who carried a letter from Lyons to Rome in 177 AD, becoming a bishop in the church in Lyons on his return. Pothinus was a bishop who preceded him, suffering martyrdom at 90 years of age in 177. Irenaeus said that he saw Polycarp in Smyrna when he was younger. This means he was acquainted with southern Europe from France to Asia Minor. His memory would thus include the first half of the 2nd century and he associated with those who had memory of the last half of the first century.

He quoted many New Testament books by name. He said that what the apostles first preached and taught had been "handed down to us in the scriptures" by them. He said that Matthew had written a gospel while Peter and Paul were preaching in Rome and that Mark was a disciple of Peter and had written what Peter preached. He said that John's gospel had been written while the apostle was at Ephesus and that the evidence of the gospels was so certain that even the heretics were forced to admit it. He quoted from Acts and spoke of it as the work of Luke and from Revelation with John as its author. His quotes from twelve of Paul's epistles still exist. His mention of a "day of the Lord is as a thousand years" is an idea found only in II Peter, and he discussed the same subject matter as II Pet.3. In addition, Eusebius gave a list of his works that are no longer extant and mentioned quotes from I Peter, Hebrews, and I and II John. He thus quotes or alludes to all the New Testament books except Philemon, Jude, III John and James.

Justin Martyr (about 100 to 165 AD) was a native of Shechem in Palestine who spent his last years in Rome where he was martyred by the prefect Rusticus. Eusebius said of him that "He was the most noted of those who flourished in those times." Because his focus was upon Jesus, most of his quotes are from the gospels, which he described as being written by two of the apostles and two of their followers. Revelation is the only other book he quoted by name, although he makes allusions to passages from Romans, I Corinthians., Colossians., II Thessalonians, and Hebrews. He speaks of "one day is as a thousand years", found only in II Peter and gives the same idea as II Pet.3:9. In his apologies to Trypho, a Jew, and to the Roman Senate, he quotes New Testament books as the authority for the beliefs of the church and notes that the emperor can ascertain the matter for sure by looking into the writings. This shows that the books were widely circulated at this time, a fact known by friend and foe. It also shows that they were not written in Justin Martyr's generation.

Papias (about 60 to 140 AD) was a companion of Polycarp and wrote five books. Eusebius said that Papias conversed with the daughters of Philip the evangelist (see Acts 21:8,9). Papias said that he had spoken with several who were acquaintances of the apostles and they had discussed what the apostles had taught. He spoke of Mark's gospel and of Matthew's, in words that indicated that both were accepted and widely used. In a manuscript of John, dating from the 9th century when the writings of Papias were still extant, there is a Latin "argument" as a prefix citing Papias as having said that the gospel was written by John. He spoke of three gospels (all except Luke), I Peter, I John, and Revelation.

Polycarp (about 56 to 156 AD) was a bishop of Smyrna. Irenaeus knew him and said he had been taught directly by the apostles. Thus, he had talked with those who had been with Jesus. He was martyred at a very old age, saying to those who were about to kill him, "Eighty-six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?" If he became a servant of God at 14, then he was baptized about 70 AD with his birth in 56 AD.

Polycarp quoted from Philipians, Acts, I Peter, Ephesians, Matthew, Mark, Luke, all of Paul's epistles except Titus and Philemon, and from I John. Here is a man who takes us all the way back to the apostles and quoted from these books as authoritative and coming from the apostles and their associates.

Clement of Rome (about 38 to 101 AD) was a bishop of the church in Rome, being appointed as an elder of the church there in 93 AD. Since a bishop is an older man, if he was 55 when he became a bishop, he would have been born in 38 AD. He wrote a letter to the church in Corinth after a persecution by Domitian, and the letter is thought to have been written about 96 or 97 AD. He was, of course, living during the time of the apostles. He quoted from I Corinthians, noting that it was from Paul, and he rebuked them as Paul had rebuked them. He combined one text from Matthew and Luke into a single quote. He did the same with verses from Ephesians, Romans, Matthew, and Mark. He quoted from Titus, Hebrews, and I Peter. He twice made allusions to passages in II Peter.

Irenaeus (135 to 200 AD) at 20 years of age in 155 AD would have been able to talk with men of 65 whose memory (using 20 years of age again), would have taken them back to 110 AD. **Justin Martyr** (100 to 165 AD) at 20 in 120 AD would have overlapped men of 65 whose memory would have taken them back to 75 AD. **Papias** (60 to 140 AD) at 20 in 80 AD would have conversed with men aged 65 whose memory would have taken them back to 35 AD. **Polycarp** (56 to 156 AD) at aged 20 in 76 AD would have known men aged 65 whose memory would have taken them back to 31 AD. **Clement of Rome** (38 to 101 AD) was himself 15 years of age in 53 AD, 20 years of age in 58 AD, 30 years of age in 68 AD, the year of the apostle Paul's death in Rome.

What is the significance of this study? First, it takes the gospels all the way to the time of the apostles in the first century, exactly where it is claimed that they originated. These men quoted from the gospels and others as authoritative. They quoted from them knowing that their audience also knew of them. They quoted from them as coming from the apostles and those who were associates of the apostles.

Could Justin Martyr, for instance, claim that two of the gospels were written by apostles in the first century if they had only appeared 20 years before? No, there were men who would remember and know that they were new and relatively unknown.

Could Papias, for example, invent the resurrection of Jesus as a new teaching in 120 AD? No, there were men living at that time who could remember to 75 AD and who would then say, "No, we never heard of that teaching. It didn't come from the first century."

Could Clement of Rome in 93 AD have invented a man named Jesus who died upon the cross for the sins of mankind, a man who never even existed? He was writing to the church in Corinth and thus from Rome to Corinth men who could remember to 38 AD and earlier would say, "You're making that up. There was no Jesus of Nazareth who "suffered under Pontius Pilate".

Looking at these men and what they wrote proves that the gospels came from the first century, just as is commonly thought. Men who lived in the time or conversed with men who lived in the time quoted them and accepted them as authoritative and from Matthew and Mark and Luke and John.

(author's note: I am indebted for the vast majority of this article to J.W. McGarvey in Evidences of Christianity, Gospel Advocate Company, Nashville, Tennessee, 1974. It is essentially his idea and outline and information, rewritten, and with some material that I have added: some dates, conclusions, examples, etc.)