

Early Christian Writers on Apostasy and Perseverance

In putting together this article I started by first reading from the reference work—*A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs: A Reference Guide to More Than 700 Topics Discussed by the Early Church Fathers*.¹ Patristic scholar David Bercot is the editor of this work, and under the topic “Salvation” there are several subheadings, with number six being “Can those who are saved ever be lost?” The following Scriptures are quoted:

The LORD is with you when you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you. (2 Chronicles 15:2)

The righteousness of a righteous man shall not deliver him in the day of his transgression. (Ezekiel 33:12)

You will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 10:22)

Jesus said to him, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62)

If we endure, we shall also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us. (2 Timothy 2:12)

If we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment. (Hebrews 10:26)

For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. (2 Peter 2:20-21) See also Matthew 24:13; Luke 17:31-32; John 8:31-32; 15:1, 6; Galatians 6:9; James 1:12; Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:36.

The *Dictionary* then proceeds to provide 61 quotes from the Early Church Fathers.² Wanting to avoid using this resource “as a database for proof-texts,”³ I went to the

¹ Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998.

² See 586-591.

writings myself and read each quotation in context. This meant that I read several chapters before and after each quotation. Often I felt that it was necessary to read the entire letter in which the quote was found.⁴

The next resource I consulted was B. J. Oropeza's "Apostasy and Perseverance in Church History" in *Paul and Apostasy: Eschatology, Perseverance, and Falling Away in the Corinthian Congregation*.⁵ Once again I looked up every quote or reference and read it in context.⁶ After this I began assembling all the quotes into the "three basic dangers [that] threatened the early Christian communities."⁷

Temptations—Christians were tempted to engage in various vices that were associated with the practices of non-Christians (idolatry, immorality, etc.).

Deceptions—Christians encountered various heresies and false teachings spread by false teachers/prophets that threatened to seduce Christians away from their pure devotion to Christ.

Persecutions—Christians were persecuted by the governing powers of the day for their allegiance to Christ. Rather than deny Christ, many Christians chose martyrdom.

All my quotations will come from the translation provided by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*.⁸ Bercot provides the following description of those Fathers that will appear in this article.⁹

³ This is one of the three mistakes that Bercot asks readers to avoid making with this resource. See *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, Preface, xii.

⁴ I did this for *The Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Didache*, *1 Clement*, *2 Clement*, *The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians*, all the *Epistles of Ignatius* (*Ephesians*, *Magnesians*, *Trallians*, *Romans*, *Philadelphians*, *Smyrnaeans*, *Polycarp*, including *The Martyrdom of Ignatius*), *Tertullian's Prescription Against Heretics* and *Scorpiace*.

⁵ Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000, 1-34. Traditional Calvinists Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, in their book *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), recommend that readers see Oropeza's "excellent history of interpretation on the matter of perseverance and apostasy" (10 footnote 2).

⁶ Of course, there was some overlap in material in Oropeza and Bercot.

⁷ Oropeza, *Paul and Apostasy*, 2. Oropeza says, "Scholars normally recognize these topics within the respective writings" (*Paul and Apostasy*, 2, fn. 8).

⁸ Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994, obtained at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/index.html>

Barnabas, Epistle of (c. 70-100). An anonymous work widely circulated among the early Christians. Many early Christians believed this work to have been written by Barnabas, the well-known companion of the apostle Paul. Some writers, such as Clement of Alexandria, even considered it to be Scripture. It is included in the early manuscript, Codex Sinaiticus, which contains much of the modern New Testament. Most modern scholars doubt it was actually written by the historic Barnabas.

Clement of Rome (1st century). Bishop of the church at Rome; he may well have been a companion of both Peter and Paul (Phil. 4:3). On behalf of the church in Rome, he wrote a letter to the Corinthian church (c. 95) in aid to the church leaders who had been ousted by a minority faction. The work designated as Second Clement was at one time erroneously attributed to Clement of Rome. However, it is actually an early sermon or homily, the authorship of which is unknown.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215). Learned Christian teacher at Alexandria, Egypt, who was in charge of the catechetical school there. Origen was one of his pupils.

Cyprian (d. 258). Bishop of the church at Carthage, North Africa, during a period of fierce persecution. He often had to work underground. However, he was eventually captured and executed by the Romans. An extensive collection of letters written by and to Cyprian still remains, along with various treatises written by him. These works give tremendous insight into the structure of the church in the middle of the third century.

Eusebius (270-340). Bishop of the church in Caesarea during the time of Constantine's reign. His Ecclesiastical History is a principle source for the history of the church from the first century down through the time of Emperor Constantine.

Hermas (1st or 2nd century). Author of an allegorical work entitled *The Shepherd*, which was widely read and held in great esteem by many early Christian churches. Origen believed the author to be the same person referred to by Paul in Romans 16:14. The Muratorian Fragment asserts that he was the brother of Pius, second century bishop of Rome.

Ignatius (c. 35-107). Bishop of the church at Antioch and a personal disciple of one or more apostles. He was executed in Rome c. 107. On his way to Rome as a prisoner, Ignatius wrote a letter to several churches; these letters give considerable insight into the structure and beliefs of the churches in Asia Minor at the close of the apostolic age.

⁹ *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, "Who's Who in the Ante-Nicene Fathers," xv-xx.

Irenaeus (c. 130-200). Bishop of the church at Lyons (in modern day France) where he was a native of Smyrna. In 190, Irenaeus wrote to Victor, bishop of Rome, pleading tolerance for the Christians of Asia Minor who celebrated Easter on a different day than did Rome.

Justin Martyr (c. 100-165). Philosopher who converted to Christianity and became a tireless evangelist and apologist. Justin wrote more concerning Christianity than any other person prior to his time. He spent the last years of his life in Rome, where he was executed as a martyr (c. 165).

Lactantius (c. 250-325). Prominent Roman teacher of rhetoric who later converted to Christianity. In his old age, he was summoned by Emperor Constantine to Gaul (France) to tutor Constantine's son, Crispus.

Polycarp (c. 69-156). Faithful bishop of the church at Smyrna, friend of Ignatius, and a disciple of the apostle John. He was arrested in his very old age and was burned to death.

Tertullian (c. 160-230). Fiery Christian writer in Carthage, North Africa. He may have been an ordained presbyter. He wrote numerous apologies, works against heretics, and exhortations to other Christians—nearly all of which are in Latin. Near the beginning of the third century, he came under the influence of the Montanist sect. Around 211, he seems to have left the church to join a Montanist congregation, although this is not certain.

Temptations: Avoid Vices and Practice Virtues

Clement of Rome (c. 96) writes to the Corinthian congregation whose unity has been threatened because a “few rash and self-confident persons” have kindled shameful and detestable seditions towards the established leaders (presbyters) in the congregation (*1 Clement* 1). This jealous rivalry and envy has caused righteousness and peace to depart from the community (*1 Clement* 3). The writer laments:

Every one abandons the fear of God, and is become blind in His faith, neither walks in the ordinances of His appointment, nor acts a part becoming a Christian, but walks after his own wicked lusts, resuming the practice of an unrighteous and ungodly envy, by which death itself entered into the world. (*1 Clement* 3)

Since history has demonstrated that many evils have flowed from envy and jealousy (*1 Clement* 4-6), the Corinthians are exhorted to repent (*1 Clement* 7-8), yield obedience to God’s “glorious will,” and to “forsake all fruitless labors and strife, and envy, which leads to death” (*1 Clement* 9:1). Furthermore, they are to “be of humble mind, laying aside all haughtiness, and pride, and foolishness, and angry feelings” (*1 Clement* 13), and “to obey God rather than to follow those who, through pride and sedition, have become the leaders of a detestable emulation [jealous rivalry]” (*1 Clement* 14). He then warns, “For we shall incur no slight injury, but rather great danger, if we rashly yield ourselves to the inclinations of men who aim at exciting strife and tumults, so as to draw us away from what is good” (*1 Clement* 14; cf. 47). Clement bids his readers to cleave “to those who cultivate peace with godliness” (*1 Clement* 15), and to follow the humility and submission that Christ and other saints practiced (*1 Clement* 16-19), which brings peace and harmony with others (*1 Clement* 19-20). Clement then gives these exhortations and warnings:

Take heed, beloved, lest His many kindnesses lead to the condemnation of us all. [For thus it must be] unless we walk worthy of Him, and with one mind do those things which are good and well-pleasing in His sight. (*1 Clement* 21)

Since then all things are seen and heard [by God], let us fear Him, and forsake those wicked works which proceed from evil desires; so that, through His mercy, we may be protected from the judgments to come. For whither can any of us flee from His mighty hand? Or what world will receive any of those who run away from Him? (*1 Clement* 28)

Let us therefore earnestly strive to be found in the number of those who wait for Him, in order that we may share in His promised gifts.¹⁰ But how, beloved, shall this be done? If our understanding be fixed by faith towards God; if we earnestly seek the things which are pleasing and acceptable to Him; if we do the things which are in harmony with His blameless will; and if we follow the way of truth, casting away from us all unrighteousness and iniquity, along with all covetousness, strife, evil practices, deceit, whispering, and evil-speaking, all hatred of God, pride and haughtiness, vainglory and ambition. For they that do such things are hateful to God; and not only they that do them, but also those who take pleasure in those who do them. (*1 Clement 35*)

Why are there strifes, and tumults, and divisions, and schisms, and wars among you? Have we not [all] one God and one Christ? Is there not one Spirit of grace poured out upon us? And have we not one calling in Christ? Why do we divide and tear to pieces the members of Christ, and raise up strife against our own body, and have reached such a height of madness as to forget that “we are members one of another?” Remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, how He said, “Woe to that man [by whom offences come]! It were better for him that he had never been born, than that he should cast a stumbling-block before one of my elect. Yea, it were better for him that a millstone should be hung about [his neck], and he should be sunk in the depths of the sea, than that he should cast a stumbling-block before one of my little ones.” Your schism has subverted [the faith of] many, has discouraged many, has given rise to doubt in many, and has caused grief to us all. And still your sedition continues. (*1 Clement 46*)

Those responsible for laying the foundation of this sedition are urged to submit to the presbyters, repent, and to lay aside their pride and arrogance. For it is better that they occupy a humble place in the flock of Christ, than being highly exalted and ultimately “cast out from the hope of His people” (*1 Clement 57*).¹¹

Similar to Clement, Ignatius of Antioch (c. 107) warns believers about following a schismatic person:

¹⁰ Three sentences earlier these “gifts of God” (*1 Clement 35:1*) are mentioned as: “Life in immortality, splendor in righteousness, truth in perfect confidence, faith in assurance, self-control in holiness!” (*1 Clement 35:2*)

¹¹ In reading Clement it is rather obvious that he places a lot of emphasis on works of righteousness—avoiding sin and pursuing holiness. However, one should keep in mind that he says: “And we, too, [like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob] . . . are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, or understanding, or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men.” (*1 Clement 32*)

Keep yourselves from those evil plants which Jesus Christ does not tend, because they are not the planting of the Father. Not that I have found any division among you, but exceeding purity. For as many as are of God and of Jesus Christ are also with the bishop. And as many as shall, in the exercise of repentance, return into the unity of the Church, these, too, shall belong to God, that they may live according to Jesus Christ. Do not err, my brethren. If any man follows him that makes a schism in the Church, he shall not inherit the kingdom of God. (*Epistle of the Philadelphians 3*)¹²

The author of the epistle of Barnabas (c. 100) both admonishes and warns his readers about coming dangers:

Since, therefore, the days are evil, and Satan possesses the power of this world, we ought to give heed to ourselves, and diligently inquire into the ordinances of the Lord. Fear and patience, then, are helpers of our faith; and long-suffering and continence are things which fight on our side. . . . We ought therefore, brethren, carefully to inquire concerning our salvation, lest the wicked one, having made his entrance by deceit, should hurl us forth from our [true] life.¹³ (*Barnabas 2:1-2, 10*).

Let us then utterly flee from all the works of iniquity, lest these should take hold of us; and let us hate the error of the present time, that we may set our love on the world to come: let us not give loose reins to our soul, that it should have power to run with sinners and the wicked, lest we become like them. (*Barnabas 4:1-2*)¹⁴

We take earnest heed in these last days; for the whole [past] time of your faith will profit you nothing, unless now in this wicked time we also withstand coming sources of danger, as becomes the sons of God. That the Black One may find no means of entrance, let us flee from every vanity, let us utterly hate the works of the way of wickedness. . . . (*Barnabas 4:9-10*)

Let us be spiritually-minded: let us be a perfect temple to God. As much as in us lies, let us meditate upon the fear of God, and let us keep His commandments, that we may rejoice in His ordinances. The Lord will judge the world without respect of persons. Each

¹² Ignatius later writes: “For where there is division and wrath, God does not dwell. To all them that repent, the Lord grants forgiveness, if they turn in penitence to the unity of God, and to communion with the bishop” (*Philadelphians 8:1*).

¹³ B. J. Oropeza comments that this passage refers to “careless Christians” who forfeit their “salvific life” (*Paul and Apostasy: Eschatology, Perseverance, and Falling Away in the Corinthian Congregation*, 203).

¹⁴ For believers to become wicked sinners is, in the author’s mind, to share in their same fate—“eternal death with punishments” (*Barnabas 20:1*).

will receive as he has done: if he is righteous, his righteousness will precede him; if he is wicked, the reward of wickedness is before him. Take heed, lest resting at our ease, as those who are the called [of God], we should fall asleep in our sins, and the wicked prince, acquiring power over us, should thrust us away from the kingdom of the Lord. (*Barnabas* 4:11-13)

In the last chapters of the Epistle of Barnabas (18-21), the author sets two ways before Christians which are described in the metaphors of light and darkness (referring to abstaining from or the practicing of vices).¹⁵ Those who walk in the light “will be glorified in the kingdom of heaven” (*Barnabas* 21:1), and will be “safe in the day of judgment” (*Barnabas* 21:6).¹⁶ While those who walk in darkness will experience “eternal death with punishment” (*Barnabas* 20:1), and will be “destroyed with their works” (*Barnabas* 21:1).¹⁷

“The Didache (c. 100) also maintains two ways: the way of life or death. The way of life is associated with loving God and one’s neighbor. It involves abstaining from vices

¹⁵ Oropeza, *Paul and Apostasy*, 3.

¹⁶ The following is a summary of the way of light: to love and glorify God; to not join yourself with those who walk in the way of death; to not forsake the Lord’s commandments; to not exalt or take glory to yourself; to not take evil counsel against your neighbor; to not allow over-boldness to enter into your soul; to not commit fornication or adultery; to not be a corrupter of youth; to not allow any kind of impurity to come out of your mouth; to not be mindful of evil against your brother; to not be of a doubtful mind; to not take the name of the Lord in vain; to not slay the child by procuring abortion, nor destroying it after it is born; to not covet; to not make a schism; to hate what is displeasing to God and all hypocrisy; to hate the wicked one; to be pure in your soul (as far as possible); to be meek and peaceable; to love your neighbor; and to confess your sins. (*Barnabas* 19:2-12)

¹⁷ The vices which lead to death and “destroy the soul” (*Barnabas* 20:1) are the following:

idolatry, over-confidence, the arrogance of power, hypocrisy, double-heartedness, adultery, murder, rapine [i.e., plundering], haughtiness, transgression, deceit, malice, self-sufficiency, poisoning, magic, avarice, want of the fear of God. [In this way, too,] are those who persecute the good, those who hate truth, those who love falsehood, those who know not the reward of righteousness, those who cleave not to that which is good, those who attend not with just judgment to the widow and orphan, those who watch not to the fear of God, [but incline] to wickedness, from whom meekness and patience are far off; persons who love vanity, follow after a reward, pity not the needy, labor not in aid of him who is overcome with toil; who are prone to evil-speaking, who know not Him that made them, who are murderers of children, destroyers of the workmanship of God; who turn away him that is in want, who oppress the afflicted, who are advocates of the rich, who are unjust judges of the poor, and who are in every respect transgressors. (*Barnabas* 20:1-2)

mentioned in the Ten Commandments or related to bodily lusts, sorcery, and idolatry (including meat sacrificed to idols).¹⁸ The way of death includes the practices of these vices¹⁹ (*Didache* 1-6).²⁰

In Polycarp's epistle to the Philippians (2nd c.) the vice of covetousness is a significant danger.²¹ Presbyters are advised to be "keeping far off from all covetousness" (*Philippians* 6). Polycarp expresses his grief over a former presbyter Valens and his wife who apparently committed some act of covetousness. He hopes that the Lord will grant them repentance.²² He enjoins his readers to "abstain from covetousness," and "every form of evil," and goes on to give this warning, "If a man does not keep himself from covetousness, he shall be defiled by idolatry, and shall be judged as one of the heathen" (*Philippians* 11).

Polycarp says believers "ought to walk worthy of His commandments and glory," and that deacons are to be blameless, not slanderers or lovers of money, but temperate in all things, "walking according to the truth of the Lord" (*Philippians* 5). He then adds:

If we please Him in this present world, we shall receive also the future world, according as He has promised to us that He will raise us again from the dead, and that if we live

¹⁸ Other vices to be abstained from are: murder, adultery, pederasty, fornication, stealing, practicing magic or witchcraft, killing a child by abortion; coveting; bearing false witness; speaking evil; lying; filthy talking; hypocrisy; hating others, money-loving, lustful, being hot-tempered, jealous, or quarrelsome. (*Didache* 1-4)

¹⁹ The vices that the author associates with the way of death are:

murders, adulteries, lusts, fornications, thefts, idolatries, magic arts, witchcrafts, rapines [i.e., plunderings], false witnessings, hypocrisies, double-heartedness, deceit, haughtiness, depravity, self-will, greediness, filthy talking, jealousy, over-confidence, loftiness, boastfulness; persecutors of the good, hating truth, loving a lie, not knowing a reward for righteousness, not cleaving to good nor to righteous judgment, watching not for that which is good, but for that which is evil; from whom meekness and endurance are far, loving vanities, pursuing requital, not pitying a poor man, not laboring for the afflicted, not knowing Him that made them, murderers of children, destroyers of the handiwork of God, turning away from him that is in want, afflicting him that is distressed, advocates of the rich, lawless judges of the poor, utter sinners. Be delivered, children, from all these. (*Didache* 5)

²⁰ Oropeza, *Paul and Apostasy*, 3.

²¹ Oropeza, *Paul and Apostasy*, 4.

²² Oropeza, *Paul and Apostasy*, 4.

worthily of Him, “we shall also reign together with Him,” provided only we believe. In like manner, let the young men also be blameless in all things, being especially careful to preserve purity, and keeping themselves in, as with a bridle, from every kind of evil. For it is well that they should be cut off from the lusts that are in the world, since “every lust wars against the spirit;” [1 Peter 2:11] and “neither fornicators, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, shall inherit the kingdom of God,” [1 Corinthians 6:9-10] nor those who do things inconsistent and unbecoming. Wherefore, it is needful to abstain from all these things, being subject to the presbyters and deacons, as unto God and Christ. (*Philippians 5*)²³

In an ancient homily (c. 150) the author exhorts his audience to pursue righteousness and abstain from vices:

Let us, then, not only call Him Lord, for that will not save us. For He saith, “Not everyone that saith to me, Lord, Lord, shall be saved, but he that worketh righteousness.” Wherefore, brethren, let us confess Him by our works, by loving one another, by not committing adultery, or speaking evil of one another, or cherishing envy; but by being continent, compassionate, and good. We ought also to sympathize with one another, and not be avaricious.²⁴ By such works let us confess Him, and not by those that are of an opposite kind. And it is not fitting that we should fear men, but rather God. For this reason, if we should do such [wicked] things, the Lord hath said, “Even though ye were gathered together to me in my very bosom, yet if ye were not to keep my commandments, I would cast you off, and say unto you, Depart from me; I know you not whence ye are, ye workers of iniquity.” (*2 Clement 4*)

The author further summons his readers to “do the will of Him that called us,” (*2 Clement 5*) and to consider

that the sojourning in the flesh in this world is but brief and transient, but the promise of Christ is great and wonderful, even the rest of the kingdom to come, and of life everlasting. By what course of conduct, then, shall we attain these things, but by leading a holy and righteous life, and by deeming these worldly things as not belonging to us, and not fixing our desires upon them? For if we desire to possess them, we fall away from the path of righteousness. (*2 Clement 5*)

²³ Polycarp goes on to counsel presbyters to “be compassionate and merciful to all, bringing back those that wander,” and to “be zealous in the pursuit of that which is good, keeping ourselves from causes of offense, from false brethren, and from those who in hypocrisy bear the name of the Lord, and draw away vain men into error” (*Philippians 6*).

²⁴ To be avaricious is to have an insatiable greed for riches.

The writer goes on to say that this present world (which urges one to “adultery and corruption, avarice and deceit”), is an enemy to the world to come (which “bids farewell to these things”), and thus, we cannot “be the friends of both” (*2 Clement* 6). Therefore,

Let us reckon that it is better to hate the things present, since they are trifling, and transient, and corruptible; and to love those [which are to come,] as being good and incorruptible. For if we do the will of Christ, we shall find rest; otherwise, nothing shall deliver us from eternal punishment, if we disobey His commandments. . . . How can we hope to enter into the royal residence of God unless we keep our baptism holy and undefiled? Or who shall be our advocate, unless we be found possessed of works of holiness and righteousness? (*2 Clement* 6)

Let us also, while we are in this world, repent with our whole heart of the evil deeds we have done in the flesh, that we may be saved by the Lord, while we have yet an opportunity of repentance. For after we have gone out of the world, no further power of confessing or repenting will there belong to us. Wherefore, brethren, by doing the will of the Father, and keeping the flesh holy, and observing the commandments of the Lord, we shall obtain eternal life. (*2 Clement* 8)²⁵

B. J. Oropeza writes:

If the warning against vices and the call to repentance marks a facet of apostasy in patristic writings of the late first and early second centuries, the Shepherd of Hermas epitomizes this aspect. Those who have sinned grievously and committed apostasy are beckoned to return. Falling away and repentance are portrayed in complex ways, and this perhaps compliments the multifaceted nature of earliest Christian discourses on the issue. Contrary to the book of Hebrews, which seems to teach that baptized Christians

²⁵ Later Clement writes:

So, then, brethren, having received no small occasion to repent, while we have opportunity, let us turn to God who called us, while yet we have One to receive us. For if we renounce these indulgences and conquer the soul by not fulfilling its wicked desires, we shall be partakers of the mercy of Jesus. (*2 Clement* 16)

Let us, then, repent with our whole heart, that no one of us may perish amiss. For if we have commands and engage in withdrawing from idols and instructing others, how much more ought a soul already knowing God not to perish. Rendering, therefore, mutual help, let us raise the weak also in that which is good, that all of us may be saved. . . . Let us remember the commandments of the Lord, and not be allured back by worldly lusts, but let us . . . draw near and try to make progress in the Lord’s commands, that we all having the same mind may be gathered together for life. (*2 Clement* 17)

are not given a second chance once they fall away (cf. Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31), the Shepherd of Hermas affirms that apostates may be forgiven while a gap of time remains before the final eschaton. A refusal to respond to this offer will result in final condemnation. Those who have denied the Lord in the past are given a second chance, but those who deny him in the coming tribulation will be rejected “from their life” (*Her. Vis.* 2.2).

In the vision of the tower under construction (the church), numerous stones (believers) are gathered for the building. Among the rejected are those who are not genuine Christians; they received their faith in hypocrisy. Others do not remain in the truth, and others who go astray are finally burned in fire (*Vis.* 3.6-7). Some others are novices who turn away before they are baptized, and still others fall away due to hardships, being lead astray by their riches. They may become useful stones, however, if they are separated from their riches. The penitents receive 12 commands; salvific life depends on their observance (*Her. Man.* 12.3-6). Repentance would become unprofitable for the Christian who falls again after restoration (*Man.* 4.1:8; 3:6).

In the Parables, rods of various shapes and sizes represent different kinds of believers: the faithful, rich, double-minded, doubtful-minded, and hypocritical deceivers. These are allowed to repent – if they do not, they will lose eternal life (*Her. Sim.* 8.6-11). Apostates and traitors who blaspheme the Lord by their sins are completely destroyed (*Sim.* 8.6:4). Another parable describes apostates as certain stones which are cast away from the house of God and delivered to women who represent 12 vices. They may enter the house again if they follow virgins who represent 12 virtues. Certain apostates became worse than they were before they believed and will suffer eternal death even though they had fully known God. Nevertheless, most people, whether apostates or fallen ministers, have an opportunity to repent and be restored (*Sim.* 9.13-15, 18ff). Hermas and his audience are to persevere and practice repentance if they wish to partake of life (*Sim.* 10.2-4).²⁶

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 180) recounts how God has recorded the sins of men of old (David and Solomon)

for our instruction . . . that we might know, in the first place, that our God and theirs is one, and that sins do not please Him although committed by men of renown; and in the second place, that we should keep from wickedness. For if these men of old time, who preceded us in the gifts [bestowed upon them], and for whom the Son of God had not yet suffered, when they committed any sin and served fleshly lusts, were rendered

²⁶ *Paul and Apostasy*, 4-5.

objects of such disgrace, what shall the men of the present day suffer, who have despised the Lord's coming, and become the slaves of their own lusts? And truly the death of the Lord became [the means of] healing and remission of sins to the former, but Christ shall not die again in behalf of those who now commit sin, for death shall no more have dominion over Him. . . . We ought not, therefore, as that presbyter remarks, to be puffed up, nor be severe upon those of old time, but ought ourselves to fear, lest perchance, after [we have come to] the knowledge of Christ, if we do things displeasing to God, we obtain no further forgiveness of sins, but be shut out from His kingdom. And therefore it was that Paul said, "For if [God] spared not the natural branches, [take heed] lest He also spare not thee [Romans 11:21]. . . . (*Against Heresies*, Book 4:27.2)

Irenaeus proceeds to quote from 1 Corinthians 10:1-12,²⁷ where Israel fell under the judgment of God for craving evil things, and then comments:

As then the unrighteous, the idolaters, and fornicators perished, so also is it now: for both the Lord declares, that such persons are sent into eternal fire; and the apostle says, "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, not effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God." [1 Corinthians 6:9-10] And as it was not to those who are without that he said these things, but to us—lest we should be cast forth from the kingdom of God, by doing any such thing. . . . And again does the apostle

²⁷ Irenaeus wrote:

Thou wilt notice, too, that the transgressions of the common people have been described in like manner, not for the sake of those who did then transgress, but as a means of instruction unto us, and that we should understand that it is one and the same God against whom these men sinned, and against whom certain persons do now transgress from among those who profess to have believed in Him. But this also, [as the presbyter states,] has Paul declared most plainly in the Epistle to the Corinthians, when he says, "Brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and were all baptized unto Moses in the sea, and did all eat the same spiritual meat, and did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual rock that followed them; and the rock was Christ. But with many of them God was not well pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. These things were for our example (*in figuram nostri*), to the intent that we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted; neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them, as it is written: The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them also did, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. But all these things happened to them in a figure, and were written for our admonition, upon whom the end of the world (*saeculorum*) is come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall." (*Against Heresies*, Book 4:27.3)

say, "Let no man deceive you with vain words; for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the sons of mistrust. Be not ye therefore partakers with them."
[Ephesians 5:6-7] (*Against Heresies*, Book 4:27.4)

Deceptions: Watch Out for False Teachers and Heresies

The "early Christians frequently believed that apostasy came by way of deceivers at the instigation of the devil, and terrible consequences awaited such people."²⁸

The writings of Ignatius have several warnings about being on guard against false teachers and the heresy they disseminate. In the letter to the Christians at Ephesus, Ignatius is happy to report that "all live according to the truth, and that no sect has any dwelling-place among you. Nor, indeed, do you hearken to any one rather than to Jesus Christ speaking in truth" (*Epistle to the Ephesians* 6). He mentions that there are false teachers who "are in the habit of carrying about the name [of Jesus Christ] in wicked guile, while yet they practice things unworthy of God, whom you must flee as you would wild beasts. For they are ravening dogs, who bite secretly, against whom you must be on your guard" (*Epistle to the Ephesians* 7).²⁹

The readers are further admonished to "Let not then any one deceive you" (*Epistle to the Ephesians* 8), and commended because "you did not allow [false teachers] to sow among you, but stopped your ears, that you might not receive those things [i.e., false doctrines] which were sown by them" (*Epistle to the Ephesians* 9). Ignatius then gives this solemn warning:

Do not err, my brethren. Those that corrupt families shall not inherit the kingdom of God. If, then, those who do this as respects the flesh have suffered death, how much more shall this be the case with any one who corrupts by wicked doctrine the faith of God, for which Jesus Christ was crucified! Such a one becoming defiled [in this way], shall go away into everlasting fire, and so shall every one that hearkens unto him. . . . Be not anointed with the bad odor of the doctrine of the prince of this world; let him not lead you away captive from the life which is set before you. And why are we not all prudent, since we have received the knowledge of God, which is Jesus Christ? Why do

²⁸ Oropeza, *Paul and Apostasy*, 6.

²⁹ In another letter Ignatius writes: "Wherefore, as children of light and truth, flee from division and wicked doctrines. . . . For there are many wolves . . . who, by means of a pernicious pleasure, carry captive those that are running towards God; but in your unity they shall have no place" (*Epistle to the Philadelphians* 2).

we foolishly perish, not recognizing the gift which the Lord has of a truth sent to us?
(*Epistle to the Ephesians* 16-17)

In the letter to the Magnesians, Ignatius admonishes his readers, “Be not deceived with strange doctrines, nor with old fables, which are unprofitable” (*Epistle to Magnesians* 8). Later he writes:

I desire to guard you beforehand, that you fall not upon the hooks of vain doctrine, but that you attain to full assurance in regard to the birth, and passion, and resurrection which took place in the time of the government of Pontius Pilate, being truly and certainly accomplished by Jesus Christ, who is our hope, from which may no one of you ever be turned aside. (*Epistle to Magnesians* 11)

In yet another letter, Ignatius entreats his readers to

use Christian nourishment only, and abstain from herbage of a different kind; I mean heresy. For those [that are given to this] mix up Jesus Christ with their own poison, speaking things which are unworthy of credit, like those who administer a deadly drug in sweet wine, which he who is ignorant of does greedily take, with a fatal pleasure leading to his own death. Be on your guard, therefore, against such persons. (*Epistle to the Trallians* 6-7)

Furthermore:

Stop your ears, therefore, when any one speaks to you at variance with Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, and was also of Mary; who was truly born, and ate and drank. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified, and [truly] died, in the sight of beings in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth. He was also truly raised from the dead, His Father quickening Him, even as after the same manner His Father will so raise up us who believe in Him by Christ Jesus, apart from whom we do not possess the true life. (*Epistle to the Trallians* 9)

“The final section of the *Didache* echoes the Synoptic tradition (Matt. 24:4-13, 15, 21-26; Mark 13:5ff; Luke 21:8ff; cf. 2 Thes. 2:3ff; Rev. 13:13-14) when it warns against apostasy through the deception of false prophets in the last days:”³⁰

Watch for your life’s sake. Let not your lamps be quenched, nor your loins unloosed; but be ready, for you know not the hour in which our Lord comes. But often shall you come together, seeking the things which are befitting to your souls: for the whole time of your

³⁰ Oropeza, *Paul and Apostasy*, 6.

faith will not profit you, if you be not made perfect in the last time. For in the last days false prophets and corrupters shall be multiplied, and the sheep shall be turned into wolves, and love shall be turned into hate; for when lawlessness increases, they shall hate and persecute and betray one another, and then shall appear the world-deceiver as the Son of God, and shall do signs and wonders, and the earth shall be delivered into his hands, and he shall do iniquitous things which have never yet come to pass since the beginning. Then shall the creation of men come into the fire of trial, and many shall be made to stumble and shall perish; but they that endure in their faith shall be saved from under the curse itself. (*Didache* 16)

Tertullian argues that believers ought not to be surprised or alarmed at the existence of heresies since Christ and his apostles³¹ told us beforehand that they would arise and gave, “in anticipation, warnings to avoid them” (*Prescription Against Heretics* 4, cf. 1).³² Neither should believers be surprised that heresies “subvert the faith of some” (*Prescription Against Heretics* 1). Heresies are a trial to faith, giving faith the opportunity to be approved (*Prescriptions Against Heretics* 1). While heresies “are produced for the weakening and the extinction of faith,” they have “no strength whenever they encounter a really powerful faith” (*Prescriptions Against Heretics* 2).

According to Tertullian, heresy is whatever contradicts the “rule of faith” which he defends as

³¹ Tertullian mentions that it is the same Paul, who in his letter to the Galatians,

counts “heresies” among “the sins of the flesh,” [Galatians 5:20] who also intimates to Titus, that “a man who is a heretic” must be “rejected after the first admonition,” on the ground that “he that is such is perverted, and commits sin, as a self-condemned man.” [Titus 3:10-11] Indeed, in almost every epistle, when enjoining on us (the duty) of avoiding false doctrines, he sharply condemns heresies. Of these the practical effects are false doctrines, called in Greek *heresies*, a word used in the sense of that choice which a man makes when he either teaches them (to others) or takes up with them (for himself). For this reason it is that he calls the heretic self-condemned, because he has himself chosen that for which he is condemned. We, however, are not permitted to cherish any object after our own will, nor yet to make choice of that which another has introduced of his private fancy. In the Lord’s apostles we possess our authority; for even they did not of themselves choose to introduce anything, but faithfully delivered to the nations (of mankind) the doctrine which they had received from Christ. If, therefore, even “an angel from heaven should preach any other gospel” (than theirs), he would be called accursed by us. (*Prescription Against Heretics* 6)

³² Therefore, heresies “must be shunned” (*Prescription Against Heretics* 4).

the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, and, under the name of God, was seen in diverse manners by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe; will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh. This rule, as it will be proved, was taught by Christ, and raises among ourselves no other questions than those which heresies introduce, and which make men heretics. (*Prescription Against Heretics* 13)³³

Tertullian sees heretics as ravenous wolves “lurking within to waste the flock of Christ” (*Prescription Against Heretics* 4). They pervert the Scriptures by interpreting them to suit their own purposes (*Prescription Against Heretics* 17, cf. 4, 38).³⁴ Their teaching opposes the teaching “handed down from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, and Christ from God” (*Prescription Against Heretics* 37). While persecution makes martyrs, “heresy only apostates” (*Prescription Against Heretics* 4). In the face of heresies, which may cause a bishop or deacon to “have fallen from the rule (of faith),” the Christian must remain true to the faith, for “no one is a Christian but he who perseveres even to the end” (*Prescription Against Heretics* 3).

Christian apologist Justin Martyr engages in a dialogue with Trypho (c. 160), who says, “I believe, however, that many of those who say that they confess Jesus, and are called Christians, eat meats offered to idols, and declare that they are by no means injured in consequence” (*Dialogue with Trypho* 35). Justin’s response highlights the importance of remaining faithful to “the true and pure doctrine of Jesus Christ” in the face of false teachers:

³³ Tertullian believes that all heresies “have been introduced by the devil” (*Prescription Against Heretics* 40).

³⁴ Tertullian notes that heretics frequently hang out with loose company, and that ungodliness is the natural effect of their teaching, since “they say that God is not to be feared; therefore all things are in their view free and unchecked” (*Prescription against Heretics* 43).

The fact that there are such men confessing themselves to be Christians, and admitting the crucified Jesus to be both Lord and Christ, yet not teaching His doctrines, but those of the spirits of error, causes us who are disciples of the true and pure doctrine of Jesus Christ, to be more faithful and steadfast in the hope announced by Him. For what things He predicted would take place in His name, these we do see being actually accomplished in our sight. For he said, 'Many shall come in My name, clothed outwardly in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.' And, 'There shall be schisms and heresies.' [1 Corinthians 11:19] And, 'Beware of false prophets, who shall come to you clothed outwardly in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.' And, 'Many false Christ's and false apostles shall arise, and shall deceive many of the faithful.' There are, therefore, and there were many, my friends, who, coming forward in the name of Jesus, taught both to speak and act impious and blasphemous things; and these are called by us after the name of the men from whom each doctrine and opinion had its origin. (For some in one way, others in another, teach to blaspheme the Maker of all things, and Christ . . . Yet they style themselves Christians. . . .) Some are called Marcians, and some Valentinians, and some Basilidians, and some Saturnilians, and others by other names; each called after the originator of the individual opinion. . . . So that, in consequence of these events, we know that Jesus foreknew what would happen after Him, as well as in consequence of many other events which He foretold would befall those who believed on and confessed Him, the Christ. For all that we suffer, even when killed by friends, He foretold would take place; so that it is manifest no word or act of His can be found fault with. Wherefore we pray for you and for all other men who hate us; in order that you, having repented along with us, may not blaspheme Him who, by His works, by the mighty deeds even now wrought through His name, by the words He taught, by the prophecies announced concerning Him, is the blameless, and in all things irreproachable, Christ Jesus; but, believing on Him, may be saved in His second glorious advent, and may not be condemned to fire by Him. (*Dialogue with Trypho* 35)

Clement of Alexandria (c. 195) advises against giving into heretical men and their heresies in writing:

He who hopes for everlasting rest knows also that the entrance to it is toilsome "and strait." And let him who has once received the Gospel, even in the very hour in which he has come to the knowledge of salvation, "not turn back, like Lot's wife," as is said; and let him not go back either to his former life, which adheres to the things of sense, or to heresies. . . . He, who has spurned the ecclesiastical tradition, and darted off to the

opinions of heretical men, has ceased to be a man of God and to remain faithful to the Lord. (*The Stromata*, Book 7:16)³⁵

Cyprian (c. 251) bids his readers to “use foresight and watching with an anxious heart, both to perceive and to beware of the wiles of the crafty foe, that we, who have put on Christ the wisdom of God the Father, may not seem to be wanting in wisdom in the matter of providing for our salvation” (*The Treatises of Cyprian* 1:1). He cautions that “it is not persecution alone that is to be feared; nor those things which advance by open attack to overwhelm and cast down the servants of God,” for we have an enemy who is to be more feared and guarded against because he secretly creeps in to deceive us under the appearance of peace (*The Treatises of Cyprian* 1:1).

By following the example of the Lord in recognizing and resisting the temptations of the devil, Christians will not be “incautiously turned back into the nets of death,” but go on to “possess the immortality that we have received” (*The Treatises of Cyprian* 1:2).³⁶ Only by standing fast in learning and doing what Christ commanded does the Christian have security against the onslaughts of the world (*The Treatises of Cyprian* 1:2). He who does not “must of necessity waver and wander, and, caught away by a spirit of error . . . be blown about; and he will make no advance in his walk towards salvation, because he does not keep the truth of the way of salvation.” (*The Treatises of Cyprian* 1:2)

Cyprian says the devil, when he see his idols forsaken and temples deserted by new believers, devises a fraud under “the Christian name to deceive the incautious” (*The Treatises of Cyprian* 1:3):

He has invented heresies and schisms, whereby he might subvert the faith, might corrupt the truth, might divide the unity. Those whom he cannot keep in the darkness of

³⁵ Only he who “believes the Scripture and voice of the Lord, which by the Lord acts to the benefiting of men, is rightly [regarded] faithful.” (*The Stromata*, Book 7:16). Heretics are those who are “giving themselves up to pleasures, [and] wrest Scripture, in accordance with their lusts,” and “wrest them to their own opinions” (*The Stromata*, Book 7:16). Furthermore, when they quote from the Scriptures they “alter the meanings . . . according to their true nature” (*The Stromata*, Book 7:16). Therefore, the author concludes that “we must never, as do those who follow the heresies, adulterate the truth, or steal the canon of the Church, by gratifying our own lusts and vanity, by defrauding our neighbors; whom above all it is our duty, in the exercise of love to them, to teach to adhere to the truth” (*The Stromata*, Book 7:16).

³⁶ Cyprian states that this immortality is not possessed “unless we keep those commands of Christ whereby death is driven out and overcome, when He Himself warns us, and says, “If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments?” [Matt 19:17] And again: “If ye do the things that I command you, henceforth I call you not servants, but friends.” [John 16:15] (*The Treatises of Cyprian* 1:2)

the old way, he circumvents and deceives by the error of a new way. He snatches men from the Church itself; and while they seem to themselves to have already approached to the light, and to have escaped the night of the world, he pours over them again, in their unconsciousness, new darkness; so that, although they do not stand firm with the Gospel of Christ, and with the observation and law of Christ, they still call themselves Christians, and, walking in darkness, they think that they have the light, while the adversary is flattering and deceiving, who, according to the apostle's word, transforms himself into an angel of light, and equips his ministers as if they were the ministers of righteousness, who maintain night instead of day, death for salvation, despair under the offer of hope, perfidy under the pretext of faith, antichrist under the name of Christ; so that, while they feign things like the truth, they make void the truth by their subtlety. This happens, beloved brethren, so long as we do not return to the source of truth, as we do not seek the head nor keep the teaching of the heavenly Master. (*The Treatises of Cyprian* 1:3)

Oropeza states,

In view of Eusebius (c. 260-340), Simon Magus was the author of heresy (cf. Acts 8:9-24), and the devil is to be blamed for bringing the Samaritan magician to Rome and empowering him with deceitful arts which led many astray (Eus. *Hist. Eccl.* 2.13). The magician was supposedly aided by demons and venerated as a god, and Helen, his companion, was thought to be his first emanation (Just. *Apol.* 1.26; *Adv. Haer.* 1.33; cf. *Iren Haer.* 1.23:1-4). Simon's successor, Menander of Samaria, was considered to be another instrument of the devil; he claimed to save humans from the aeons through magical arts. After baptism, his followers believed themselves to be immortal in the present life. It is stated that those who claim such people as their saviors have fallen away from the true hope (Eus. *Hist. Eccl.* 3.26). Basilides of Alexandria and Saturninus of Antioch followed Menander's ways. Adherents of the former declared that eating meat sacrificed to idols or renouncing the faith in times of persecution were matters of indifference. Carpocrates is labeled as the first of the Gnostics. His followers allegedly transmitted Simon's magic in an open manner. Eusebius asserts that the devil's intention was to entrap many believers and bring them to the abyss of destruction by following these deceivers (*Hist. Eccl.* 4.7).³⁷

³⁷ *Paul and Apostasy*, 6-7. Oropeza adds,

The use of anathemas and excommunications became the normative means of handling heresy. Hippolytus (c. 170-236) affirmed that there was no place for the heretic in the church; expulsion from the earthly Eden was their lot. Cyprian (c. 258) viewed the heretics as those who

Persecutions: Martyrdom and Perseverance

Oropeza writes:

The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is sometimes considered to be the first of the “Acts of the Martyrs.” In this document Polycarp is killed for refusing to confess Caesar as Lord and offer incense; he refuses to revile Christ (*Mar. Pol.* 8ff; similarly, *Ign. Rom.* 7). Other Christians did not always follow his example. Some fell into idolatry in the face of persecutions.

Stirred by his own experience under the Diocletian (c. 284-305) persecution, Eusebius wrote *Collection of Martyrs* and emphasized persecution and martyrdom in his *History of the Church*. He describes Christians who persevered and others who fell away. Polycarp and Germanicus were found to be faithful in the persecution at Smyrna (c. 160), but Quintus threw away his salvation in the sight of the wild beasts (*Eus. Hist. Eccl.* 4.15). During Marcus Aurelius’ reign (c. 161-80), Eusebius affirms that the Christians confessed their faith despite their suffering from abuse, plundering, stoning, and imprisonment. It is recorded that in Gaul some became martyrs, but others who were untrained and unprepared (about 10 in number) proved to be “abortions” (εξετρωσάν), discouraging the zeal of others. A woman named Biblias, who had earlier denied Christ, confessed him and was joined with the martyrs. Certain defectors did likewise, but others continued to blaspheme the Christian faith, having no understanding of the “wedding garment” (i.e., Matt. 22:11ff) and no faith (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.1).

During the reign of Decius (c. 249-51), the Christians of Alexandria are said to have endured martyrdom, stoning, or having their belongings confiscated for not worshipping at an idol’s temple or chanting incantations. But some readily made unholy sacrifices, pretending that they had never been Christians, while others renounced their faith or were tortured until they did (*Hist. Eccl.* 6.41). In his account of the Diocletian persecution, Eusebius commends the heroic martyrs but is determined to mention nothing about those who made shipwreck of their salvation, believing that such reports would not edify his readers (8.2:3). He recollects Christians who suffered in horrible ways which included their being axed to death or slowly burned, having their eyes gouged out, their limbs severed, or their backs seared with melted lead. Some endured

lose their salvation because they put themselves outside the unity of the church. Cyril of Alexandria (c. 444) anathematized Nestorianism, and creeds (such as the Athanasian) declared anathemas on those who did not hold to the tenets of the creed. The condemnation of heretics gave way to abuse as church and state distinctions were blurred after the time of Constantine. (*Paul and Apostasy*, 7)

the pain of having reeds driven under their fingernails or unmentionable suffering in their private parts (8.12).³⁸

Clement seeks to inspire perseverance in the midst of suffering with these words:

Let us, therefore, work righteousness, that we may be saved to the end. Blessed are they who obey these commandments, even if for a brief space they suffer in this world, and they will gather the imperishable fruit of the resurrection. Let not the godly man, therefore, grieve; if for the present he suffer affliction, blessed is the time that awaits him there; rising up to life again with the fathers he will rejoice for ever without a grief. (2 *Clement* 19)

Cyprian (c. 250), commands the presbyters and deacons to take care of the poor and “especially those who have stood with unshaken faith and have not forsaken Christ’s flock” while in prison (*The Epistles of Cyprian* 5:2). These “glorious confessors” need to be instructed that

they ought to be humble and modest and peaceable, that they should maintain the honor of their name, so that those who have achieved glory by what they have testified, may achieve glory also by their characters. . . . For there remains more than what is yet seen to be accomplished, since it is written “Praise not any man before his death;” and again, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” [Revelation 2:10] And the Lord also says, “He that endures to the end, the same shall be saved.” [Matthew 10:22]. Let them imitate the Lord, who at the very time of His passion was not more proud, but more humble. (*The Epistles of Cyprian* 5:2)³⁹

Ignatius’s letter to the Christians in Rome gives valuable insight into the heart of a Christian who is prepared for martyrdom. Ignatius hopes to see them when he arrives as a prisoner. He fears that the love they have for him will, in some way, save him from certain death (*Epistle to the Romans* 1-2). Yet, he desires to “obtain grace to cling to my lot without hindrance unto the end” so that he may “attain to God” (*Epistle to the Romans* 1). He requests prayer for “both inward and outward strength” that he might

³⁸ Terrullian (c. 213) asks, “Does God covet man’s blood [i.e., via martyrdom]? And yet I might venture to affirm that He does, if man also covets the kingdom of heaven, if man covets a sure salvation. . . .” (*Scorpiace* 6).

³⁹ In another letter, Cyprian rejoices over the presbyter and other confessors of Christ “whom the devil has not been able to overcome,” but shares how he is grieved “over those whom a hostile persecution has cast down” (*The Epistles of Cyprian* 6:1).

not “merely be called a Christian, but really found to be one,”—a Christian “deemed faithful” (*Epistle to the Romans* 3). He says:

I write to the Churches, and impress on them all, that I shall willingly die for God, unless you hinder me. . . . Allow me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. Rather entice the wild beasts, that they may become my tomb, and may leave nothing of my body. . . . Then shall I truly be a disciple of Christ, when the world shall not see so much as my body. Entreat Christ for me, that by these instruments I may be found a sacrifice [to God]. . . . But when I suffer, I shall be the freed-man of Jesus, and shall rise again emancipated in Him. And now, being a prisoner, I learn not to desire anything worldly or vain. . . .

And let no one, of things visible or invisible, envy me that I should attain to Jesus Christ. Let fire and the cross; let the crowds of wild beasts; let tearings, breakings, and dislocations of bones; let cutting off of members; let shatterings of the whole body; and let all the dreadful torments of the devil come upon me: only let me attain to Jesus Christ.

All the pleasures of the world, and all the kingdoms of this earth, shall profit me nothing. It is better for me to die in behalf of Jesus Christ, than to reign over all the ends of the earth. “For what shall a man be profited, if he gain the whole world, but lose his own soul?” Him I seek, who died for us: Him I desire, who rose again for our sake. This is the gain which is laid up for me. . . . Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God. (*Epistle to the Romans* 4-6)

Tertullian believes that martyrdom is necessary at times in order for soldiers in God’s army to obey the command to not worship idols.

If, therefore, it is evident that from the beginning this kind of worship [of idols] has both been forbidden—witness the commands so numerous and weighty—and that it has never been engaged in without punishment following, as examples so numerous and impressive show, and that no offense is counted by God so presumptuous as a trespass of this sort, we ought further to perceive the purport of both the divine threatenings and their fulfillments, which was even then commended not only by the not calling in question, but also by the enduring of martyrdoms, for which certainly He had given occasion by forbidding idolatry. . . . The injunction is given me not to make mention of any other god, not even by speaking—as little by the tongue as by the hand—to fashion a god, and not to worship or in any way show reverence to another than Him only who

thus commands me, whom I am both bid fear that I may not be forsaken by Him, and love with my whole being, that I may die for Him. Serving as a soldier under this oath, I am challenged by the enemy. If I surrender to them, I am as they are. In maintaining this oath, I fight furiously in battle, am wounded, hewn in pieces, slain. Who wished this fatal issue to his soldier, but he who sealed him by such an oath? (*Scorpiace* 4)

In the following chapter Tertullian maintains that “martyrdom is good,” especially when the Christian faces the temptation to worship idols, which is forbidden. He goes on to write,

For martyrdom strives against and opposes idolatry. But to strive against and oppose evil cannot be ought but good. . . . For martyrdom contends with idolatry, not from some malice which they share, but from its own kindness; for it delivers from idolatry. Who will not proclaim that to be good which delivers from idolatry? What else is the opposition between idolatry and martyrdom, than that between life and death? Life will be counted to be martyrdom as much as idolatry to be death. . . . Thus martyrdoms also rage furiously, but for salvation. God also will be at liberty to heal for everlasting life by means of fires and swords, and all that is painful. (*Scorpiace* 5)

Tertullian has a long discussion on the certainty of persecutions and the reality of death for followers of Christ. Quoting a lot from the teachings of Jesus, Tertullian urges Christians towards faithful endurance in order to obtain final salvation with God.

When setting forth His chief commands, “Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” [Matthew 5:10] The following statement, indeed, applies first to all without restriction, then especially to the apostles themselves: “Blessed shall you be when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, since very great is your reward in heaven; for so used their fathers to do even to the prophets.” [Matthew 5:11-12] So that He likewise foretold their having to be themselves also slain, after the example of the prophets. . . . The rule about enduring persecution also would have had respect to us too, as to disciples by inheritance, and, (as it were,) bushes from the apostolic seed. For even thus again does He address words of guidance to the apostles: “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves;” [Matthew 10:16] and, “Beware of men, for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues; and you shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles,” etc. [Matthew 10:17-18] Now when He adds, “But the brother will deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child; and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put

to death,” [Matthew 10:21] He has clearly announced with reference to the others, (that they would be subjected to) this form of unrighteous conduct, which we do not find exemplified in the case of the apostles. For none of them had experience of a father or a brother as a betrayer, which very many of us have. Then He returns to the apostles: “And you shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake.” How much more shall we, for whom there exists the necessity of being delivered up by parents too! Thus, by allotting this very betrayal, now to the apostles, now to all, He pours out the same destruction upon all the possessors of the name, on whom the name, along with the condition that it be an object of hatred, will rest. But he who will endure on to the end—this man will be saved. By enduring what but persecution—betrayal—death? For to endure to the end is naught else than to suffer the end. And therefore there immediately follows, “The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his own lord;” [Matthew 10:24] because, seeing the Master and Lord Himself was steadfast in suffering persecution, betrayal and death, much more will it be the duty of His servants and disciples to bear the same, that they may not seem as if superior to Him, or to have got an immunity from the assaults of unrighteousness, since this itself should be glory enough for them, to be conformed to the sufferings of their Lord and Master; and, preparing them for the endurance of these, He reminds them that they must not fear such persons as kill the body only, but are not able to destroy the soul, but that they must dedicate fear to Him rather who has such power that He can kill both body and soul, and destroy them in hell [Matthew 10:28]. Who, pray, are these slayers of the body only, but the governors and kings aforesaid—men, I suppose? Who is the ruler of the soul also, but God only? Who is this but the threatener of fires hereafter, He without whose will not even one of two sparrows falls to the ground; that is, not even one of the two substances of man, flesh or spirit, because the number of our hairs also has been recorded before Him? Fear not, therefore. When He adds, “You are of more value than many sparrows,” He makes promise that we shall not in vain—that is, not without profit—fall to the ground if we choose to be killed by men rather than by God. “Whosoever therefore will confess in me before men, in him will I confess also before my Father who is in heaven; and whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I deny also before my Father who is in heaven.” [Matthew 10:32-34]

[What] if a Christian is to be stoned . . . burned . . . butchered . . . [or] put an end to by beasts . . . ? He who will endure these assaults to the end, the same shall be saved. . . . For what does He add after finishing with confession and denial? “Think not that I have come to send peace on earth, but a sword,”—undoubtedly on the earth. “For I have come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law. And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household.” [Matthew 10:34-35] For so is it brought to pass, that the brother

delivers up the brother to death, and the father the son: and the children rise up against the parents, and cause them to die. And he who endures to the end let that man be saved. [Matthew 10:22] So that this whole course of procedure characteristic of the Lord's sword, which has been sent not to heaven, but to earth, makes confession also to be there, which by enduring to the end is to issue in the suffering of death.

In the same manner, therefore, we maintain that the other announcements too refer to the condition of martyrdom. "He," says Jesus, "who will value his own life also more than me, is not worthy of me," [Luke 14:26] —that is, he who will rather live by denying, than die by confessing, me; and "he who finds his life shall lose it; but he who loses it for my sake shall find it." [Matthew 10:39] Therefore indeed he finds it, who, in winning life, denies; but he who thinks that he wins it by denying, will lose it in hell. On the other hand, he who, through confessing, is killed, will lose it for the present, but is also about to find it unto everlasting life.

Who, now, should know better the marrow of the Scriptures than the school of Christ itself?—the persons whom the Lord both chose for Himself as scholars, certainly to be fully instructed in all points, and appointed to us for masters to instruct us in all points. To whom would He have rather made known the veiled import of His own language, than to him to whom He disclosed the likeness of His own glory—to Peter, John, and James, and afterwards to Paul, to whom He granted participation in (the joys of) paradise too, prior to his martyrdom? Or do they also write differently from what they think—teachers using deceit, not truth? Addressing the Christians of Pontus, Peter, at all events, says, "How great indeed is the glory, if you suffer patiently, without being punished as evildoers! For this is a lovely feature, and even hereunto were you called, since Christ also suffered for us, leaving you Himself as an example, that you should follow His own steps." [1 Peter 2:20-21] And again: "Beloved, be not alarmed by the fiery trial which is taking place among you, as though some strange thing happened unto you. For, inasmuch as you are partakers of Christ's sufferings, do you rejoice; that, when His glory shall be revealed, you may be glad also with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, happy are you; because glory and the Spirit of God rest upon you: if only none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evil-doer, or as a busybody in other men's matters; yet (if any man suffer) as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God on this behalf." [1 Peter 4:12-14] John, in fact, exhorts us to lay down our lives even for our brethren, [1 John 3:16] affirming that there is no fear in love: "For perfect love casts out fear, since fear has punishment; and he who fears is not perfect in love." [1 John 4:18] What fear would it be better to understand (as here meant), than that which gives rise to denial? What love does he assert to be perfect, but that which puts fear to flight, and gives courage to confess?

What penalty will he appoint as the punishment of fear, but that which he who denies is about to pay, who has to be slain, body and soul, in hell? And if he teaches that we must die for the brethren, how much more for the Lord,—he being sufficiently prepared, by his own Revelation too, for giving such advice! For indeed the Spirit had sent the injunction to the angel of the church in Smyrna: “Behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that you may be tried ten days. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life.” [Revelation 2:10] Also to the angel of the church in Pergamus (mention was made) of Antipas, [Revelation 2:13] the very faithful martyr, who was slain where Satan dwells. Also to the angel of the church in Philadelphia [Revelation 3:10] (it was signified) that he who had not denied the name of the Lord was delivered from the last trial. Then to every conqueror the Spirit promises now the tree of life, and exemption from the second death; now the hidden manna with the stone of glistening whiteness, and the name unknown (to every man save him that receives it); now power to rule with a rod of iron, and the brightness of the morning star; now the being clothed in white raiment, and not having the name blotted out of the book of life, and being made in the temple of God a pillar with the inscription on it of the name of God and of the Lord, and of the heavenly Jerusalem; now a sitting with the Lord on His throne Who, pray, are these so blessed conquerors, but martyrs in the strict sense of the word? For indeed theirs are the victories whose also are the fights; theirs, however, are the fights whose also is the blood. But the souls of the martyrs both peacefully rest in the meantime under the altar, [Revelation 6:9] and support their patience by the assured hope of revenge; and, clothed in their robes, wear the dazzling halo of brightness, until others also may fully share in their glory. For yet again a countless throng are revealed, clothed in white and distinguished by palms of victory, celebrating their triumph doubtless over Antichrist, since one of the elders says, “These are they who come out of that great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” [Revelation 7:14] For the flesh is the clothing of the soul. The uncleanness, indeed, is washed away by baptism, but the stains are changed into dazzling whiteness by martyrdom. . . . When great Babylon likewise is represented as drunk with the blood of the saints, [Revelation 17:6] doubtless the supplies needful for her drunkenness are furnished by the cups of martyrdoms; and what suffering the fear of martyrdoms will entail, is in like manner shown. For among all the castaways, nay, taking precedence of them all, are the fearful. “But the fearful,” says John—and then come the others—“will have their part in the lake of fire and brimstone.” [Revelation 21:8] Thus fear, which, as stated in his epistle, love drives out, has punishment. (*Scorpiace* 9-12)

Other Passages to Consider

Temptations: Avoid Vices and Practice Virtues

Clement:

On account of his hospitality and godliness, Lot was saved out of Sodom when all the country around him was punished by means of fire and brimstone, the Lord thus making it manifest that He does not forsake those who hope in Him, but gives up those who depart from Him to punishment and torture. For Lot's wife, who went forth with him, being of a different mind from himself and not continuing in agreement with him [as to the command which had been given them], was made an example of, so as to be a pillar of salt to this day. This was done that all might know that those who are of a double mind, and who distrust the power of God, bring down judgment on themselves, and become a sign to all succeeding generations. (*1 Clement 11*)

Clement:

I think not that I counted trivial counsel concerning continence [i.e., self-restraint]; following it, a man will not repent thereof, but will save both himself and me who counseled. For it is no small reward to turn back a wandering and perishing soul for its salvation. [James 5:19-20] . . . Let us, therefore, continue in that course in which we, righteous and holy, believed. (*2 Clement 15*)

Cyprian, after rejoicing over a presbyter and other confessors of Christ whom the devil could not overcome during a time of persecution (*The Epistles of Cyprian 6:1*), exhorts them to

hold fast your glory with a brave and persevering virtue. We are still in the world; we are still placed in the battlefield; we fight daily for our lives. Care must be taken, that after such beginnings as these there should also come an increase, and that what you have begun to be with such a blessed commencement should be consummated in you. It is a slight thing to have been able to attain anything; it is more to be able to keep what you have attained; even as faith itself and saving birth makes alive, not by being received, but by being preserved. Nor is it actually the attainment, but the perfecting, that keeps a man for God. The Lord taught this in His instruction when He said, "Behold, you are made whole; sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto you." Conceive of Him as saying this also to His confessor, "Lo you are made a confessor; sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto you." Solomon also, and Saul, and many others, so long as they walked in the

Lord's ways, were able to keep the grace given to them. When the discipline of the Lord was forsaken by them, grace also forsook them.

We must persevere in the straight and narrow road of praise and glory; and since peacefulness and humility and the tranquility of a good life is fitting for all Christians, according to the word of the Lord, who looks to none other man than "to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembles at" His word, it the more behooves you confessors, who have been made an example to the rest of the brethren, to observe and fulfill this, as being those whose characters should provoke to imitation the life and conduct of all. For as the Jews were alienated from God, as those on whose account "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles," so on the other hand those are dear to God through whose conformity to discipline the name of God is declared with a testimony of praise, as it is written, the Lord Himself forewarning and saying, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven." And Paul the apostle says, "Shine as lights in the world." [Philippians 2:15] And similarly Peter exhorts: "As strangers," says he, "and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul, having your conversation honest among the Gentiles; that whereas they speak against you as evil-doers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify the Lord." [1 Peter 2:11-12] This, indeed, the greatest part of you, I rejoice to say, are careful for; and, made better by the honor of your confession itself, guard and preserve its glory by tranquil and virtuous lives.

But I hear that some infect your number, and destroy the praise of a distinguished name by their corrupt conversation; whom you yourselves, even as being lovers and guardians of your own praise, should rebuke and check and correct. For what a disgrace is suffered by your name, when one spends his days in intoxication and debauchery, another returns to that country whence he was banished, to perish when arrested, not now as being a Christian, but as being a criminal! I hear that some are puffed up and are arrogant, although it is written, "Be not high-minded, but fear: for if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not you." . . . And dares any one now, who lives by and in this very One, lift up himself and be haughty, forgetful, as well of the deeds which He did, as of the commands which He left to us either by Himself or by His apostles? But if "the servant is not greater than his Lord." let those who follow the Lord humbly and peacefully and silently tread in His steps, since the lower one is, the more exalted he may become; as says the Lord, "He that is least among you, the same shall be great."

What, then, is that—how execrable should it appear to you— which I have learned with extreme anguish and grief of mind, to wit, that there are not wanting those who defile the temples of God, and the members sanctified after confession and made glorious, with a disgraceful and infamous concubinage, associating their beds promiscuously with women's! In which, even if there be no pollution of their conscience, there is a great guilt in this very thing, that by their offense originate examples for the ruin of others. There ought also to be no contentions and emulations among you, since the Lord left to us His peace, and it is written, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." "But if you bite and find fault with one another, take heed that you be not consumed one of another." From abuse and revilings also I entreat you to abstain, for "revilers do not attain the kingdom of God; "and the tongue which has confessed Christ should be preserved sound and pure with its honor. For he who, according to Christ's precept, speaks things peaceable and good and just, daily confesses Christ. We had renounced the world when we were baptized; but we have now indeed renounced the world when tried and approved by God, we leave all that we have, and have followed the Lord, and stand and live in His faith and fear.

Let us confirm one another by mutual exhortations, and let us more and more go forward in the Lord; so that when of His mercy He shall have made that peace which He promises to give. . . . (*The Epistles of Cyprian* 6:2-6)⁴⁰

Irenaeus:

Man has received the knowledge of good and evil. It is good to obey God, and to believe in Him, and to keep His commandment, and this is the life of man; as not to obey God is evil, and this is his death. Since God, therefore, gave [to man] such mental power (*magnanimitatem*) man knew both the good of obedience and the evil of disobedience, that the eye of the mind, receiving experience of both, may with judgment make choice of the better things; and that he may never become indolent or neglectful of God's command; and learning by experience that it is an evil thing which deprives him of life, that is, disobedience to God, may never attempt it at all, but that, knowing that what preserves his life, namely, obedience to God, is good, he may diligently keep it with all earnestness. (*Against Heresies*, Book 4:39.1)

⁴⁰ Cyprian says of Virgins in the congregation:

But if they have faithfully dedicated themselves to Christ, let them persevere in modesty and chastity, without incurring any evil report, and so in courage and steadiness await the reward of virginity. But if they are unwilling or unable to persevere, it is better that they should marry, than that by their crimes they should fall into the fire. (*The Epistles of Cyprian* 61:2)

Irenaeus:

Since, therefore, all things were made by God, and since the devil has become the cause of apostasy to himself and others, justly does the Scripture always term those who remain in a state of apostasy “sons of the devil” and “angels of the wicked one” (*maligni*). For [the word] “son,” as one before me has observed, has a twofold meaning: one [is a son] in the order of nature, because he was born a son; the other, in that he was made so, is reputed a son, although there be a difference between being born so and being made so. For the first is indeed born from the person referred to; but the second is made so by him, whether as respects his creation or by the teaching of his doctrine. For when any person has been taught from the mouth of another, he is termed the son of him who instructs him, and the latter [is called] his father. According to nature, then—that is, according to creation, so to speak—we are all sons of God, because we have all been created by God. But with respect to obedience and doctrine we are not all the sons of God: those only are so who believe in Him and do His will. And those who do not believe, and do not obey His will, are sons and angels of the devil, because they do the works of the devil. And that such is the case He has declared in Isaiah: “I have begotten and brought up children, but they have rebelled against Me.” And again, where He says that these children are aliens: “Strange children have lied unto Me.” According to nature, then, they are [His] children, because they have been so created; but with regard to their works, they are not His children.

For as, among men, those sons who disobey their fathers, being disinherited, are still their sons in the course of nature, but by law are disinherited, for they do not become the heirs of their natural parents; so in the same way is it with God, those who do not obey Him being disinherited by Him, have ceased to be His sons. . . . But when they should be converted and come to repentance, and cease from evil, they should have power to become the sons of God, and to receive the inheritance of immortality which is given by Him. For this reason, therefore, He has termed those “angels of the devil,” and “children of the wicked one,” who give heed to the devil, and do his works. . . . When, however, they believe and are subject to God, and go on and keep His doctrine, they are the sons of God; but when they have apostatized and fallen into transgression, they are ascribed to their chief, the devil—to him who first became the cause of apostasy to himself, and afterwards to others. (*Against Heresies*, Book 4:41.2-3)

Tertullian:

God had foreseen also other weaknesses incident to the condition of man,—the stratagems of the enemy, the deceptive aspects of the creatures, the snares of the world; that faith, even after baptism, would be endangered; that the most, after

attaining unto salvation, would be lost again, through soiling the wedding-dress, through failing to provide oil for their torchlets (*Scorpiace* 6)⁴¹

Clement of Alexandria:

We must then exercise ourselves in taking care about those things which fall under the power of the passions, fleeing like those who are truly philosophers such articles of food as excite lust, and dissolute licentiousness in chambering and luxury; and the sensations that tend to luxury, which are a solid reward to others, must no longer be so to us. For God's greatest gift is self-restraint. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee," as having judged thee worthy according to the true election. Thus, then, while we attempt piously to advance, we shall have put on us the mild yoke of the Lord from faith to faith, one charioteer driving each of us onward to salvation, that the meet fruit of beatitude may be won. "Exercise is" according to Hippocrates of Cos, "not only the health of the body, but of the soul—fearlessness of labors—a ravenous appetite for food." (*The Stromata*, Book 2:20)

Clement of Alexandria:

[O rich man] If need be, sail round the whole world. Spare not perils and toils, that you may purchase here the heavenly kingdom. Why do transparent stones and emeralds delight thee so much, and a house that is fuel for fire . . . ? Aspire to dwell in the heavens, and to reign with God. This kingdom a man imitating God will give thee. By receiving a little here, there through all ages He will make thee a dweller with Him. Ask that you may receive; haste; strive; fear lest He disgrace thee. For He is not commanded to receive, but thou to give. The Lord did not say, give, or bring, or do good, or help, but make a friend. But a friend proves himself such not by one gift, but by long intimacy. For it is neither the faith, nor the love, nor the hope, nor the endurance of one day, but "he that endureth to the end shall be saved." [Matthew 10:22] (*Who is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 32)

Clement of Alexandria:

If one should escape the superfluity of riches, and the difficulty they interpose in the way of life, and be able to enjoy the eternal good things; but should happen, either from ignorance or involuntary circumstances, after the seal and redemption, to fall into sins or transgressions so as to be quite carried away; such a man is entirely rejected by God. . . . Forgiveness of past sins, then, God gives; but of future, each one gives to himself.

⁴¹ Tertullian writes in another place that "the world returned unto sin [after the flood] And so it is destined to fire; just as the man too is, who after baptism renews his sins (*On Baptism* 8).

And this is to repent, to condemn the past deeds, and beg oblivion of them from the Father, who only of all is able to undo what is done, by mercy proceeding from Him, and to blot out former sins by the dew of the Spirit. "For by the state in which I find you will I judge," also, is what in each case the end of all cries aloud. So that even in the case of one who has done the greatest good deeds in his life, but at the end has run headlong into wickedness, all his former pains are profitless to him, since at the catastrophe of the drama he has given up his part. . . . It is then probably impossible all at once to eradicate inbred passions; but by God's power and human intercession, and the help of brethren, and sincere repentance, and constant care, they are corrected. (*Who is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 39-40)

Commodianus:

If certain teachers, while looking for your gifts or fearing your persons, relax individual things to you, not only do I not grieve, but I am compelled to speak the truth. Thou art going to vain shows with the crowd of the evil one, where Satan is at work in the circus with din [to make a loud noise]. Thou persuadest thyself that everything that shall please thee is lawful. Thou art the offspring of the Highest, mingled with the sons of the devil. Dost thou wish to see the former things which thou hast renounced? Art thou again conversant with them? What shall the Anointed One profit thee? Or if it is permitted, on account of weakness, that thou foolishly profane. . . . Love not the world, nor its contents. Such is God's word, and it seems good to thee. Thou observest man's command, and shuntest God's. Thou trustedst to the gift whereby the teachers shut up their mouths, that they may be silent, and not tell thee the divine commands; while I speak the truth, as thou art bound look to the Highest. Assign thyself as a follower to Him whose son thou wast. If thou seekest to live, being a believing man, as do the Gentiles, the joy of the world remove thee from the grace of Christ. (*The Instructions of Commodianus* 57)

Lactantius

For it belongs to that accuser who, having invented false religions, turns men away from the heavenly path, and leads them into the way of perdition. And the appearance and shape of this way is so composed to the sight, that it appears to be level and open, and delightful with all kinds of flowers and fruits. For there are placed in it all things which are esteemed on earth as good things—I mean wealth, honor, repose, pleasure, all kinds of enticements; but together with these also injustice, cruelty, pride, perfidy, lust, avarice, discord, ignorance, falsehood, folly, and other vices. But the end of this way is as follows: When they have reached the point from which there is now no return, it is so suddenly removed, together with all its beauty, that no one is able to foresee the fraud

before that he falls headlong into a deep abyss. For whoever is captivated by the appearance of present goods, and occupied with the pursuit and enjoyment of these, shall not have foreseen the things which are about to follow after death, and shall have turned aside from God; he truly will be cast down to hell, and be condemned to eternal punishment.

But that heavenly way is set forth as difficult and hilly, or rough with dreadful thorns, or entangled with stones jutting out; so that every one must walk with the greatest labor and wearing of the feet, and with great precautions against falling. In this he has placed justice, temperance, patience, faith, chastity, self-restraint, concord, knowledge, truth, wisdom, and the other virtues; but together with these, poverty, ignominy, labor, pain, and all kinds of hardship. For whoever has extended his hope beyond the present, and chosen better things, will be without these earthly goods, that, being lightly equipped and without impediment, he may overcome the difficulty of the way. For it is impossible for him who has surrounded himself with royal pomp, or loaded himself with riches, either to enter upon or to persevere in these difficulties. And from this it is understood that it is easier for the wicked and the unrighteous to succeed in their desires, because their road is downward and on the decline; but that it is difficult for the good to attain to their wishes, because they walk along a difficult and steep path. Therefore the righteous man, since he has entered upon a hard and rugged way, must be an object of contempt, derision, and hatred. For all whom desire or pleasure drags headlong, envy him who has been able to attain to virtue, and take it ill that any one possesses that which they themselves do not possess. Therefore he will be poor, humble, ignoble, subject to injury, and yet enduring all things which are grievous; and if he shall continue his patience unceasingly to that last step and end, the crown of virtue will be given to him, and he will be rewarded by God with immortality for the labors which he has endured in life for the sake of righteousness. (*The Divine Institutes*, Book 4:4)

Lactantius:

If we have no existence after death, assuredly it is the part of the most foolish man not to promote the interests of the present life, that it may be long-continued, and may abound with all advantages. . . . But if there remains to man a longer and a better life—and this we learn both from the arguments of great philosophers, and from the answers of seers, and the divine words of prophets—it is the part of the wise man to despise this present life with its advantages, since its entire loss is compensated by immortality. (*The Divine Institutes*, Book 5:19)

Apostolic Constitutions (compiled c. 390):

Beloved, be it known to you that those who are baptized into the death of our Lord Jesus are obliged to go on no longer in sin; for as those who are dead cannot work wickedness any longer, so those who are dead with Christ cannot practice wickedness. We do not therefore believe, brethren, that any one who has received the washing of life continues in the practice of the licentious acts of transgressors. Now he who sins after his baptism, unless he repent and forsake his sins, shall be condemned to hell-fire. (Book 2:3.7)

Apostolic Constitutions (compiled c. 390)

But if you refuse to receive him that repents, you expose him to those who lie in wait to destroy, forgetting what David says: "Deliver not my soul, which confesses to You, unto destroying beasts." Wherefore Jeremiah, when he is exhorting men to repentance, says thus: "Shall not he that falls arise? Or he that turns away, cannot he return? Wherefore have my people gone back by a shameless backsliding? And they are hardened in their purpose. [Jeremiah 8:4-5] Turn, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings." [Jeremiah 3:22] Receive, therefore, without any doubting, him that repents. Be not hindered by such unmerciful men, who say that we must not be defiled with such as those, nor so much as speak to them: for such advice is from men that are unacquainted with God and His providence, and are unreasonable judges, and unmerciful brutes. These men are ignorant that we ought to avoid society with offenders, not in discourse, but in actions: for "the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him." [Ezekiel 18:20] And again: "If a land sins against me by trespassing grievously, and I stretch out my hand upon it, and break the staff of bread upon it, and send famine upon it, and destroy man and beast therein: though these three men, Noah, Job, and Daniel, were in the midst of it, they shall only save their own souls by their righteousness, says the Lord God." [Ezekiel 14:13-14] The Scripture most clearly shows that a righteous man that converses with a wicked man does not perish with him. For in the present world the righteous and the wicked are mingled together in the common affairs of life, but not in holy communion: and in this the friends and favorites of God are guilty of no sin. For they do but imitate "their Father which is in heaven, who makes His sun to rise on the righteous and unrighteous, and sends His rain on the evil and on the good;" [Matthew 5:45] and the righteous man undergoes no peril on this account. For those who conquer and those who are conquered are in the same place of running, but only those who have bravely undergone the race are where the garland is bestowed; and "no one is crowned, unless he strive lawfully." [2 Timothy 2:5] For every one shall give account of himself, and God

will not destroy the righteous with the wicked; for with Him it is a constant rule, that innocence is never punished. For neither did He drown Noah, nor burn up Lot, nor destroy Rahab for company. And if you desire to know how this matter was among us, Judas was one of us, and took the like part of the ministry which we had; and Simon the Magician received the seal of the Lord. Yet both the one and the other proving wicked, the former hanged himself, and the latter, as he flew in the air in a manner unnatural, was dashed against the earth. Moreover, Noah and his sons with him were in the ark; but Ham, who alone was found wicked, received punishment in his son. But if fathers are not punished for their children, nor children for their fathers, it is thence clear that neither will wives be punished for their husbands, nor servants for their masters, nor one relation for another, nor one friend for another, nor the righteous for the wicked. But every one will be required an account of his own doing. For neither was punishment inflicted on Noah for the world, nor was Lot destroyed by fire for the Sodomites, nor was Rahab slain for the inhabitants of Jericho, nor Israel for the Egyptians. For not the dwelling together, but the agreement in their sentiments, alone could condemn the righteous with the wicked. We ought not therefore to hearken to such persons who call for death, and hate mankind, and love accusations, and under fair pretences bring men to death. For one man shall not die for another, but “every one is held with the chains of his own sins.” [Proverbs 5:22] And, “behold, the man and his work is before his face.” [Isaiah 62:11] Now we ought to assist those who are with us, and are in danger, and fall, and, as far as lies in our power, to reduce them to sobriety by our exhortations, and so save them from death. For “the whole have no need of the physician, but the sick;” [Matthew 9:12] since “it is not pleasing in the sight of your Father that one of these little ones should perish.” [Matthew 18:14] For we ought not to establish the will of hard-hearted men, but the will of the God and Father of the universe, which is revealed to us by Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be glory for ever. Amen. (Book 2:3.14)

Deceptions: Watch Out for False Teachers and Heresies

Clement:

Wherefore, my brethren, let us do the will of the Father who called us, that we may live; and let us earnestly follow after virtue, but forsake every wicked tendency which would lead us into transgression; and flee from ungodliness, lest evils overtake us. For if we are diligent in doing good, peace will follow us. On this account, such men cannot find it [i.e., peace] as are influenced by human terrors, and prefer rather present enjoyment to the promise which shall afterwards be fulfilled. For they know not what torment present enjoyment recurs, or what felicity is involved in the future promise. And if, indeed, they themselves only aid such things, it would be [the more] tolerable; but now they persist

in imbuing⁴² innocent souls with their pernicious doctrines, not knowing that they shall receive a double condemnation, both they and those that hear them. (2 *Clement* 10)

Justin Martyr:

But if, Trypho," I continued, "some of your race, who say they believe in this Christ, compel those Gentiles who believe in this Christ to live in all respects according to the law given by Moses, or choose not to associate so intimately with them, I in like manner do not approve of them. But I believe that even those, who have been persuaded by them to observe the legal dispensation along with their confession of God in Christ, shall probably be saved. And I hold, further, that such as have confessed and known this man to be Christ, yet who have gone back from some cause to the legal dispensation, and have denied that this man is Christ, and have repented not before death, shall by no means be saved. Further, I hold that those of the seed of Abraham who live according to the law, and do not believe in this Christ before death, shall likewise not be saved, and especially those who have anathematized and do anathematize this very Christ in the synagogues, and everything by which they might obtain salvation and escape the vengeance of fire. For the goodness and the loving-kindness of God, and His boundless riches, hold righteous and sinless the man who, as Ezekiel tells, repents of sins; and reckons sinful, unrighteous, and impious the man who falls away from piety and righteousness to unrighteousness and ungodliness. Wherefore also our Lord Jesus Christ said, 'In whatsoever things I shall take you, in these I shall judge you.'" (*Dialogue with Trypho* 47)

Persecutions: Martyrdom and Perseverance

Clement:

It is of the great day of judgment He speaks, when they shall see those among us who were guilty of ungodliness and erred in their estimate of the commands of Jesus Christ. The righteous, having succeeded both in enduring the trials and hating the indulgences of the soul, whenever they witness how those who have swerved and denied Jesus by words or deeds are punished with grievous torments in fire unquenchable, will give glory to their God and say, "There will be hope for him who has served God with his whole heart." (2 *Clement* 17)

⁴² To imbue appears to have the meaning of "to infect."

Cyprian:

As I am about to speak, beloved brethren, of patience, and to declare its advantages and benefits, from what point should I rather begin than this, that I see that even at this time, for your audience of me, patience is needful Nor do I find, beloved brethren, among the rest of the ways of heavenly discipline wherein the path of our hope and faith is directed to the attainment of the divine rewards, anything of more advantage, either as more useful for life or more helpful to glory, than that we who are laboring in the precepts of the Lord with the obedience of fear and devotion, should especially, with our whole watchfulness, be careful of patience. . . .

But if we also, beloved brethren, are in Christ; if we put Him on, if He is the way of our salvation, who follow Christ in the footsteps of salvation, let us walk by the example of Christ, as the Apostle John instructs us, saying, "He who saith he abideth in Christ, ought himself also to walk even as He walked." [1 John 2:6] Peter also, upon whom by the Lord's condescension the Church was founded, lays it down in his epistle, and says, "Christ suffered for us, leaving you an example, that ye should follow His steps, who did no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth; who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, threatened not, but gave Himself up to him that judged Him unjustly." [1 Peter 2:21-23] . . .

Whence every one of us, when he is born and received in the inn of this world, takes his beginning from tears; and, although still unconscious and ignorant of all things, he knows nothing else in that very earliest birth except to weep. By a natural foresight, the untrained soul laments the anxieties and labors of the mortal life, and even in the beginning bears witness by its wails and groans to the storms of the world which it is entering. For the sweat of the brow and labor is the condition of life so long as it lasts. Nor can there be supplied any consolations to those that sweat and toil other than patience; which consolations, while in this world they are fit and necessary for all men, are especially so for us who are more shaken by the siege of the devil, who, daily standing in the battle-field, are wearied with the wrestlings of an inveterate and skillful enemy; for us who, besides the various and continual battles of temptations, must also in the contest of persecutions forsake our patrimonies, undergo imprisonment, bear chains, spend our lives, endure the sword, the wild beasts, fires, crucifixions—in fine, all kinds of torments and penalties, to be endured in the faith and courage of patience; as the Lord Himself instructs us, and says, "These things have I spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. But in the world ye shall have tribulation; yet be confident, for I have overcome the world." [John 16:33] And if we who have renounced the devil and the world, suffer the tribulations and mischiefs of the devil and the world with more

frequency and violence, how much more ought we to keep patience, wherewith as our helper and ally, we may bear all mischievous things!

It is the wholesome precept of our Lord and Master: "He that endureth," saith He, "unto the end, the same shall be saved;" [Matthew 10:22] and again, "If ye continue," saith He, "in my word, ye shall be truly my disciples; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." [John 8:31-32] We must endure and persevere, beloved brethren, in order that, being admitted to the hope of truth and liberty, we may attain to the truth and liberty itself; for that very fact that we are Christians is the substance of faith and hope. But that hope and faith may attain to their result, there is need of patience. For we are not following after present glory, but future, according to what Paul the apostle also warns us, and says, "We are saved by hope; but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he hope for? But if we hope for that which we see not, then do we by patience wait for it." [Romans 8:24-25] Therefore, waiting and patience are needful, that we may fulfill that which we have begun to be, and may receive that which we believe and hope for, according to God's own showing. Moreover, in another place, the same apostle instructs the righteous and the doers of good works, and them who lay up for themselves treasures in heaven with the increase of the divine usury, that they also should be patient; and teaches them, saying, "Therefore, while we have time, let us labor in that which is good unto all men, but especially to them who are of the household of faith. But let us not faint in well-doing, for in its season we shall reap." [Galatians 6:9-10] He admonishes that no man should impatiently faint in his labor, that none should be either called off or overcome by temptations and desist in the midst of the praise and in the way of glory; and the things that are past perish, while those which have begun cease to be perfect; as it is written, "The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him in whatever day he shall transgress;" [Ezekiel 33:12] and again, "Hold that which thou hast, that another take not thy crown." [Revelation 3:11] Which word exhorts us to persevere with patience and courage, so that he who strives towards the crown with the praise now near at hand, may be crowned by the continuance of patience. . . .

Wherefore, beloved brethren, having diligently pondered both the benefits of patience and the evils of impatience, let us hold fast with full watchfulness the patience whereby we abide in Christ, that with Christ we may attain to God. . . . It is patience which both commends and keeps us to God. It is patience, too, which assuages anger, which bridles the tongue, governs the mind, guards peace, rules discipline, breaks the force of lust, represses the violence of pride, extinguishes the fire of enmity, checks the power of the rich, soothes the want of the poor, protects a blessed integrity in virgins, a careful purity in widows, in those who are united and married a single affection. It makes men humble

in prosperity, brave in adversity, gentle towards wrongs and contempts. It teaches us quickly to pardon those who wrong us; and if you yourself do wrong, to entreat long and earnestly. It resists temptations, suffers persecutions, perfects passions and martyrdoms. It is patience which firmly fortifies the foundations of our faith. It is this which lifts up on high the increase of our hope. It is this which directs our doing, that we may hold fast the way of Christ while we walk by His patience. It is this that makes us to persevere as sons of God, while we imitate our Father's patience. . . .

Let us, beloved brethren, consider His patience in our persecutions and sufferings; let us give an obedience full of expectation to His advent; and let us not hasten, servants as we are, to be defended before our Lord with irreligious and immodest eagerness. Let us rather press onward and labor, and, watching with our whole heart, and steadfast to all endurance, let us keep the Lord's precepts; so that when that day of anger and vengeance shall come, we may not be punished with the impious and sinners, but may be honored with the righteous and those that fear God. (*Treatise* 9:1, 9, 12, 13, 20, 24)

Cyprian:

The Lord, admonishing us of this in His Gospel, and teaching that we should not return again to the devil and to the world, which we have renounced, and whence we have escaped, says: "No man looking back, and putting his hand to the plough, is fit for the kingdom of God." [Luke 9:62] And again: "And let him that is in the field not return back. Remember Lot's wife." [Luke 17:31-32] And lest any one should be retarded by any covetousness of wealth or attraction of his own people from following Christ, He adds, and says: "He that forsaketh not all that he hath, cannot be my disciple." [Luke 14:33] . . .

That we must press on and persevere in faith and virtue, and in completion of heavenly and spiritual grace, that we may attain to the palm and the crown. In the book of Chronicles: "The Lord is with you so long as ye also are with Him; but if ye forsake Him, He will forsake you." [2 Chronicles 15:2] In Ezekiel also: "The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him in what day soever he may transgress." [Ezekiel 33:12] Moreover, in the Gospel the Lord speaks, and says: "He that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved." [Matthew 10:22] And again: "If ye shall abide in my word, ye shall be my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." [John 8:31-32] Moreover, forewarning us that we ought always to be ready, and to stand firmly equipped and armed, He adds, and says: "Let your loins be girded about, and your lamps burning, and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their lord when he shall return from the wedding, that when he cometh and knocketh they may open unto him. Blessed are those servants whom their lord, when he cometh, shall find

watching.” [Luke 12:35–37] Also the blessed Apostle Paul, that our faith may advance and grow, and attain to the highest point, exhorts us, saying: “Know ye not, that they which run in a race run all indeed, yet one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And they, indeed, that they may receive a corruptible crown; but ye an incorruptible.” [1 Corinthians 9:24-25] And again: “No man that warreth for God binds himself to anxieties of this world, that he may be able to please Him to whom he hath approved himself. Moreover, also, if a man should contend, he will not be crowned unless he have fought lawfully.” [2 Timothy 2:4-5] And again: “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the mercy of God, that ye constitute your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God; and be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed in the renewing of your spirit, that ye may prove what is the will of God, good, and acceptable, and perfect.” [Romans 12:1-2] And again: “We are children of God: but if children, then heirs; heirs indeed of God, but joint-heirs with Christ, if we suffer together, that we may also be glorified together.” [Romans 8:16-17] And in the Apocalypse the same exhortation of divine preaching speaks, saying, “Hold fast that which thou hast, lest another take thy crown.” [Revelation 3:11] (*Treatise* 11:7-8)

Lactantius:

For what if, as Furius said, a man should be dragged away, harassed, banished, should be in want, be deprived of his hands, have his eyes put out, be condemned, put into chains, be burned, be miserably tortured also? will virtue lose its reward, or rather, will it perish itself? By no means. But it will both receive its reward from God the Judge, and it will live, and always flourish. And if you take away these things, nothing in the life of man can appear to be so useless, so foolish, as virtue, the natural goodness and honor of which may teach us that the soul is not mortal, and that a divine reward is appointed for it by God. But on this account God willed that virtue itself should be concealed under the character of folly, that the mystery of truth and of His religion might be secret; that He might show the vanity and error of these superstitions, and of that earthly wisdom which raises itself too highly, and exhibits great self-complacency, that its difficulty being at length set forth, that most narrow path might lead to the lofty reward of immortality.

I have shown, as I think, why our people are esteemed foolish by the foolish. For to choose to be tortured and slain, rather than to take incense in three fingers, and throw it upon the hearth, appears as foolish as, in a case where life is endangered, to be more careful of the life of another than of one’s own. For they do not know how great an act of impiety it is to adore any other object than God, who made heaven and earth, who fashioned the human race, breathed into them the breath of life, and gave them light.

But if he is accounted the most worthless of slaves who runs away and deserts his master, and if he is judged most deserving of stripes and chains, and a prison, and the cross, and of all evil; and if a son, in the same manner, is thought abandoned and impious who deserts his father, that he may not pay him obedience, and on this account is considered deserving of being disinherited, and of having his name removed for ever from his family—how much more so does he who forsakes God, in whom the two names entitled to equal reverence, of Lord and Father, alike meet? For what benefit does he who buys a slave bestow upon him, beyond the nourishment with which he supplies him for his own advantage? And he who begets a son has it not in his power to effect that he shall be conceived, or born, or live; from which it is evident that he is not the father, but only the instrument of generation. Of what punishments, therefore, is he deserving, who forsakes Him who is both the true Master and Father, but those which God Himself has appointed? Who has prepared everlasting fire for the wicked spirits; and this He Himself threatens by His prophets to the impious and the rebellious. (*The Divine Institutes*, Book 5:19)

Ignatius:

The last times have come upon us. Let us therefore be of a reverent spirit, and fear the long-suffering of God, that it tend not to our condemnation. For let us either stand in awe of the wrath to come, or show regard for the grace which is at present displayed—one of two things. Only [in one way or another] let us be found in Christ Jesus unto the true life. Apart from Him, let nothing attract you. (*Epistle to the Ephesians* 11)

Ignatius:

None of these things is hid from you, if you perfectly possess that faith and love towards Christ Jesus which are the beginning and the end of life. For the beginning is faith, and the end is love. Now these two, being inseparably connected together, are of God, while all other things which are requisite for a holy life follow after them. . . . Those that profess themselves to be Christians shall be recognized by their conduct. For there is not now a demand for mere profession, but that a man be found continuing in the power of faith to the end. (*Epistle to the Ephesians* 14)⁴³

⁴³ Ignatius elsewhere writes: “If we endure all the assaults of the prince of this world, and escape them, we shall enjoy God” (*Epistle to the Magnesians* 1). Ignatius says Christians “have come to the possession of new hope” by Christ’s death, “and therefore endure, that we may be found the disciples of Jesus Christ, our only Master—how shall we be able to live apart from Him . . . ?” (*Epistle to the Magnesians* 9) To the church at Smyrna, Ignatius says, “You have loved me when absent as well as when present. May God recompense you, for whose sake, while you endure all things, you shall attain unto Him” (*Epistle to*

Concluding Remarks

It seems rather apparent that the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* believed that a Christian could sever their saving relationship with Christ (i.e., commit apostasy) by persisting in unrepentant sinful behavior; by holding to false teachings that pervert the gospel message proclaimed by Christ and his apostles; or by denying Christ under the pressure of persecution. Possessing an enduring faith and love for Christ, pursuing a righteous lifestyle fitting of a Christian, and practicing repentance whenever one fell short of fulfilling God's will, were themes that permeated the writings of the early church fathers.

New Testament scholar B. J. Oropeza and Patristic scholar David Bercot both concluded from their research that Christians can commit apostasy.⁴⁴ Bercot wrote, "Since the early Christians believed that our continued faith and obedience are necessary for salvation, it naturally follows that they believed that a 'saved' person could still end up being lost."⁴⁵

In a debate with Reformed Calvinist James White, Catholic theologian James Akin stated, "The Bible clearly and unambiguously teaches that . . . some true Christians fall away and will finally be lost."⁴⁶ He goes on to say that while some Christians

find this an unusual and novel teaching . . . it is in fact the historic teaching of Christian orthodoxy as well as the teaching of the vast majority of Christians today, held by Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Methodists, Pentecostals, Church of Christ members, Lutherans, and a host of others. The only people who dispute it are Presbyterians and most Baptists, and those who have been influenced by Presbyterians and Baptists.

the Smyrnaeans 9). Ignatius tells Polycarp, "Be sober as an athlete of God: the prize set before you is immortality and eternal life" (*Epistle to Polycarp* 2). He goes on to exhort, "Please Him under whom you fight, and from whom you receive your wages. Let none of you be found a deserter. Let your baptism endure as your arms; your faith as your helmet; your love as your spear; your patience as a complete panoply" (*Epistle to Polycarp* 6).

⁴⁴ Oropeza wrote: "The church fathers would affirm the reality of the phenomenon of apostasy . . ." (*Paul and Apostasy*, 13).

⁴⁵ *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up: A New Look at Today's Evangelical Church in the Light of Early Christianity* (Amberston: Scroll Publishing Company, 1989), 65.

⁴⁶ All the following quotes from Akin were obtained at <http://www.cin.org/users/james/files/loss.htm>

Akin goes on to argue that this was the position of well-known Christian theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther. He then adds that John Calvin was the first person to come up with this idea that no true Christian could ever fall away and be finally lost:

You can check that out for yourself. I did. I searched multiple books and called half a dozen Calvinist seminaries, talking to their systematic theology and church history professors, and no one could name a person before Calvin who taught this thesis. They all said Calvin was the first. I even called John Jefferson Davis, who published an article in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* on the history of this doctrine, a man who is himself a Calvinist, but who has researched the history of this doctrine thoroughly, and he said Calvin was the first to teach it.⁴⁷

This poses a problem even for those who claim that they take their teachings exclusively from Scripture, namely, “How could a doctrine this important—if true—remain completely undiscovered for the first 1500 years of Church history and, if Jesus comes back any time soon, for three quarters of all of Church history?”

Other important doctrines have been known all through Christian history. Christians always knew, even when heretics denied it, that Jesus Christ was God. Christians always knew, even when heretics denied it, that Jesus Christ is fully man as well as fully God. And Christians always knew, even when heretics denied it, that they were saved purely by God's grace.

So when it turns out that Christians never knew that true Christians can never fall away, and then suddenly 1500 years later someone starts claiming it, one has to ask who is conveying the true teaching of the apostles

Akin's remarks are accurate and problematic for Calvinists who need to provide a reasonable explanation for why the post-apostolic Christians (c. 100-325) came to affirm the possibility of apostasy so soon after the original apostles passed away. If the New Testament writers clearly taught that Christians cannot commit apostasy, as Calvinists argue, how did the early Christian writers come to affirm just the opposite?

⁴⁷ Jefferson's article can be obtained at:

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/files/Davis%20History%20of%20the%20Perseverance%20of%20the%20Saints.pdf>

What the Christian Church historically believed about the security of the believer is not the ultimate test for determining our stance on this issue today, but the lack of historical precedent should serve as a warning. Before John Calvin, the teaching of unconditional eternal security was not a doctrine that was taught by the universal church through the centuries. Therefore, while the Scriptures are the ultimate test for truth on this issue, “once saved, always saved” teachers need to acknowledge that their doctrine is historically an anomaly. Furthermore, the brand of “once saved, always saved” teaching that says Christians can fall away from Christ or walk away from the Christian faith, and cease trusting in Jesus and still be on their way to heaven is nowhere to be found in historic Christianity prior to the twentieth century.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Chester K. Lehman says:

“Perseverance of the saints,” as a special term was used by Walter Scott (Plymouth Brethren) as early as 1913 ([*Selections from Our Fifty Years Written Ministry*, publisher Alfred] Holness, 186). Under a section heading, “The Eternal Security of the Sheep,” he writes, “Can my sins separate me from Christ or break the bond of eternal life? Impossible!” Elsewhere he states, “Eternal life therefore cannot be lost: It is absolutely secure” (Holness, 110). L. S. Chafer, whose Gospel ministry extends back to 1900, did not know when the term came into use; the significance which he attached to this doctrine is shown by the 100-page treatment given to it in his vast *Systematic Theology*. (“Eternal Security,” in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia: A Comprehensive Reference Work on the Anabaptist-Mennonite Movement*, Vol. 2 (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1956), 253.