

The Apostolic Fathers as Witnesses to the Early Christian Apostasy

Matthew J. Grey

Matthew J. Grey is a graduate student in archaeology and the history of antiquity at Andrews University.

Critical to an appreciation of the Restoration is an understanding of the early Christian apostasy that necessitated such a restoration. Indeed, of all people, the Latter-day Saints should be among the most interested in the details of early Christian doctrine, practice, and development. The entire Restoration, after all, is based on the understanding that Christ established a church with defined leadership, doctrines, and ordinances, “upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 2:20). This foundation, however, soon crumbled as the early church fell into an apostasy, replacing its original doctrines and practices with a variety of concepts from throughout the Roman Empire. Thus, a new dispensation was required in order for the original organization to be restored to the earth.

Often in our writing and teaching of the Apostasy, we discuss the death of the Apostles in the mid to late first century, possibly followed by a brief mention of Neoplatonic philosophy entering the church in the third century, and conclude with a reference to a council and creed of the fourth century, leaving this as sufficient evidence that an apostasy occurred. Although these are all aspects of the bigger picture, jumping from the first to the fourth century denies us the opportunity to examine that crucial period when the lights actually went out—the two hundred years in between (with a special emphasis on the early second century).

Fortunately, the era immediately following the death of the New Testament Apostles is rich in written material, presenting a relatively clear picture of what was happening in the church as it dealt with the

increasing loss of revelation and inspired leadership. Though several important studies have been published on the Latter-day Saint understanding of the Apostasy, this particular period is seldom emphasized in our writing and teaching.¹ The purpose of this article is to offer a brief overview of these writings and the individuals who produced them. These texts are among the greatest extant witnesses that an apostasy did occur and in what manner it so quickly evolved. The hope is that once the value of these writings becomes more evident, their use in research and classroom discussions will enhance our understanding of the Apostasy and present a more complete picture.

A major challenge in attempting an overview of such a broad and dynamic period, however, is the ability to successfully deal with any one aspect in the detail it deserves. Therefore, this article will first present, for general readers, a short sketch of some of the early Christian leaders and their writings, leaving more extensive references in the notes for further investigation. The second section will introduce the messages of these writings as they might pertain to studies of the early Christian apostasy, with the hope that they might open the door for more comprehensive study of the apostolic fathers as witnesses to the early Christian apostasy.

Background to the “Apostolic Fathers”

During the New Testament period, the Savior and His Apostles spoke on several occasions concerning the future of the church. As has been shown elsewhere, these statements left the New Testament church with an understanding that the immediate future looked bleak under the threat of apostasy, whereas the long term offered promise of hope and renewal.² It is difficult to determine how much of this understanding passed on to future generations of church leaders. There are many writings, however, of the individuals who succeeded the Apostles in various regions of the empire. These writings are perhaps the greatest witnesses as to how this apostasy actually developed.

These men are known to historians as the “apostolic fathers” because of their personal association with the Apostles and perhaps even their apostolic appointments to lead in succession. The era in which these leaders ministered (the late first and early second centuries) is extremely interesting. These individuals knew the pure teachings of the Apostles, perhaps understood that the lights were going out of the church, and were left with the responsibility of holding things together. Their writings were often considered scripture by early Christians and reveal how the postapostolic church understood the Christian message.

They also give precise detail into its internal conflicts.

Ignatius of Antioch. One such leader is Ignatius of Antioch. According to the fourth-century church historian Eusebius, Ignatius was ordained to succeed Peter as a bishop of the city and was an ardent defender of apostolic teachings.³ Little is known about him biographically, but his writings indicate that he was sent to Rome after being condemned to death in Antioch (about AD 107–8).⁴ As a military escort marched him through Syria, he wrote seven letters from Smyrna and Troas to various congregations throughout Asia Minor.⁵ These letters have been noted for the “unparalleled light they shed on the history of the church at this time.”⁶ From them we learn much of church structure, as well as the internal problems causing this profound crisis.⁷

The picture of the church offered by Ignatius in his letters is quite interesting to Latter-day Saints. As acknowledged by leading scholars, it is clear from the texts that the church of Ignatius’s day was still under the direction of the spirit of prophecy. Indeed, Ignatius himself was still claiming revelation, insisting that the Spirit was whispering to him concerning the problems within the church.⁸ These problems (discussed below) were beginning to fan out from Syria into Asia Minor, deeply affecting many of the churches along the way, and Ignatius wrote hurriedly to warn them of the approaching storm.⁹

Polycarp of Smyrna. A contemporary church leader to whom Ignatius wrote a letter was Polycarp (about AD 70–156). According to early Christian tradition, Polycarp was also “a companion to the apostles . . . on whom the eyewitnesses . . . had conferred the episcopate [bishopric] of the church at Smyrna.” Furthermore, Ignatius was “well aware that Polycarp was an apostolic man” and thus commended him to the Christians at Antioch.¹⁰ John was apparently the Apostle who taught and perhaps even ordained Polycarp, who led the church in Smyrna for over forty years and was considered an important link in the early apostolic tradition. This link was noted early on by Irenaeus, a late second-century writer who had heard Polycarp’s teachings in his childhood. “Polycarp was not only instructed by apostles . . . but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the church in Smyrna.”¹¹ A reference to John as Polycarp’s “ordainer” was set forth by another late second-century writer, Tertullian. “The church at Smyrna . . . records that Polycarp was placed therein by John.”¹²

Polycarp’s important Epistle to the Philippians was most likely written around AD 110, or shortly after Ignatius’s death in Rome. Although not as extensive as the writings of Ignatius, the letter of Polycarp similarly offers insight into both the internal as well as external threats to

the church in Asia Minor in the early second century.¹³ Together, the writings of Ignatius and Polycarp provide invaluable source material for understanding the apostasy engulfing the Eastern church.

Clement of Rome. Just as the Christian church was growing and encountering difficulties in the East, notably in Asia Minor, so the Western church was developing around the burgeoning center of Rome. Here the Apostles Peter and Paul had preached a few decades earlier and had likewise appointed individuals to lead the church in their absence. A notable apostolic father of the Roman church was Clement.

Again, it is the late second-century Irenaeus who writes of Clement, “He had seen the blessed apostles, and had been conversant with them, [had] the preaching of the apostles still echoing [in his ears], and their traditions before his eyes.”¹⁴ Irenaeus’s contemporary, Tertullian, also mentions that “the church in Rome makes Clement to have been ordained . . . by Peter.”¹⁵ Based upon the early dating of these two texts, it is highly probable that Clement indeed, as Ignatius and Polycarp in the East, associated with and was ordained by the Apostles to a position of authority in the Roman church.¹⁶

Clement is noted for a letter he wrote to the church at Corinth (1 Clement), which was apparently written about the time John was writing Revelation on the isle of Patmos (about AD 95–96). This letter was considered scripture in some areas of the church and was found in some of the oldest surviving manuscripts of the New Testament—a fourth-century Syrian text (the Apostolic Canons) as well as the fifth-century Codex Alexandrinus (where it was placed immediately following Revelation).¹⁷ The contents of the letter will be discussed below and, like the writings of Ignatius and Polycarp, will shed much light on the extreme difficulties facing the church, especially in Corinth.

The Shepherd of Hermas. One final writing that will be noted here is the Shepherd of Hermas. This was an important text to the Christian community in Rome in the late first or early second century. Authorship is still debated, but there is an interesting possibility that it was written by the Hermas of the Roman church mentioned by Paul in Romans 16:4.¹⁸ It is perhaps one of the greatest witnesses to the state of the church during this period. It attests to the continuation of visions, prophecy, and direct revelation in the early church and also adds to the current discussion of internal crises.

The Shepherd of Hermas was of such value to the early Christians that it appears in an early list of authoritative writings (the Muratorian Canon, about AD 180–200)¹⁹ and was also considered scripture in the late second through third centuries by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria,

and Origen. It continued in some canons well into the fourth century; it was quoted as scripture by Athanasius and appeared at the end of the New Testament in the Codex Sinaiticus.²⁰

There are certainly other individuals and writings of the period that could be considered—for example, Papias,²¹ the Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas, and so on. The above-mentioned texts and authors were singled out specifically for the light they shed on the discussion of the second-century apostasy. Indeed, the letters of Ignatius, Polycarp, and Clement, along with the Shepherd of Hermas, are the greatest extant nonbiblical witnesses of the development of an apostasy following the death of the Apostles. The second part of this article will now examine these texts, focusing specifically on those aspects that describe the opening stages of the Great Apostasy.

The Apostolic Fathers and Initial Causes of the Apostasy

Often in Latter-day Saint writing and teaching, the Apostasy is treated rather quickly, with a vague notion of philosophy and creeds replacing revelation. These were certainly symptoms of the deeply rooted apostasy of the third and fourth centuries. However, the actual causes of the Apostasy are much more complicated and are laid out in great detail within the early Christian texts that have been introduced. In this way, the apostolic fathers may be used as invaluable witnesses of the problems within the church that acted as catalysts to the Great Apostasy that was well underway by their time period.

False teachings. A major theme that is often emphasized by the apostolic fathers (perhaps owing to its presence as early as New Testament times) is the permeation of apostate doctrines by false teachers within the church. This problem certainly continued into the early second century. Between Syria and Asia Minor, Ignatius reports in his Epistle to the Ephesians that some are “maliciously and deceitfully” spreading false teachings concerning Christ.²² “Therefore, let no one deceive you. . . . I have learned that certain people . . . passed your way with evil doctrine.”²³ Much of the letter is Ignatius’s plea to reject this false teaching.

His other letters carry similar warnings. To the Trallians he warned of those who “mix Jesus with poison . . . which the unsuspecting victim accepts without fear,”²⁴ and to the Philadelphians he urged, “flee from . . . false teaching . . . for many seemingly trustworthy wolves” are attempting “by means of wicked pleasure” to ensnare the saints.²⁵ To the Magnesians he wrote, “Do not be deceived by strange doctrines.”²⁶ In that same letter Ignatius offers insight into what some of those

strange doctrines are: “I want to forewarn you not to get snagged on the hooks of worthless opinions but instead to be fully convinced about the birth and the suffering and the resurrection.”²⁷

Similar concerns were expressed by other leaders in Asia Minor as well. Quoting 1 John 4:2–3, Polycarp likewise warns the Philippians that some are “twist[ing] the sayings of the Lord to suit [their] own sinful desires and claim[ing] that there is neither resurrection or judgment . . . [so] let us leave behind the worthless speculation . . . [and] their false teachings.”²⁸ It is clear from these texts of Ignatius and Polycarp that the issue of the nature of Christ was among the first concepts to be attacked by false teachers within the church (see also 1 John 4:1–6). Modern scholars note that Ignatius (and presumably Polycarp as well) was dealing with the Judaizers denying the divinity of Christ on one hand and with the Docetists (who maintained that all flesh is evil) denying the humanity of Christ on the other.²⁹

The Shepherd of Hermas also decries the “hypocrites [who] brought in strange doctrines, and perverted God’s servants”³⁰ among the Christians in Rome. These teachers came from within the church and “because of this arrogance of theirs, understanding has left them and . . . [they] want to be volunteer teachers, foolish though they are.”³¹ It is telling that an entire Mandate from the Shepherd text (there are only twelve) instructs on how to discern between true and false prophets. Although this portion of the text attests to an ongoing and legitimate spirit of prophecy in the church of this period, it is also clear that false prophets and teachers abounded and were succeeding in seducing many.³² Indeed, false teachings were a serious threat to the young church (at least in Syria, Asia Minor, and Rome), but there were also other factors contributing to its “falling away.”

Disunity in the church. It is important to note that, along with false teachings, serious divisions among church members were among the greatest contributors to the early Christian apostasy. Perhaps more than any other warning, the apostolic fathers emphasized the grave danger of such disunity. This was especially the case in Clement’s letter to the Corinthian church. There the situation became so inflamed that church leaders were removed from office, and others usurped their positions. It is difficult to determine whether this was a result of a violent coup or some other kind of power play. In any case, the situation called for external intervention, which was provided by Clement’s letter. Even though Clement’s responsibilities were clearly over the Roman church, his letter to the Corinthians upbraids them for disunity, convicts them of gross errors, and urges them to return rightful leaders to their posi-

tions of authority.³³

The letter begins by calling this “dispute” a “detestable and unholy schism,”³⁴ and he sadly remembers a time when “every faction and every schism were abominable” to them. Now he warns that the Corinthians have brought upon themselves “no ordinary harm, but rather great danger . . . [for] recklessly surrender[ing] to the purposes of men who launch out into strife and dissention.”³⁵ Clement pleads, “Therefore let us unite with those who devoutly practice peace, and not those who hypocritically wish for peace.”³⁶ Throughout the letter he asks, “Why is there strife and angry outbursts and dissentions and schisms and conflict among you? . . . Why do we tear and rip apart the members of Christ, and rebel against our own body?”³⁷ This extreme disunity will have no small effect upon the future of the church. “Your schism has perverted many; it has brought many to despair, plunged many into doubt, and causes all of us to sorrow.”³⁸

Unfortunately, such internal dissensions were not unique to Corinth but were occurring in many regions. Even in Clement’s own city of Rome, the Shepherd of Hermas was in circulation and warned of similar disunity there. Early in the text, Hermas has a vision of a great tower that he is told represents the church. He comes to notice that some stones in the tower have serious “cracks” (the word in Greek is *schismas*, or “schisms”). He is told that these cracked stones “are the ones who are against one another in their hearts and are not at peace among themselves. Instead, they have only the appearance of peace, and when they leave one another their evil thoughts remain in their hearts.”³⁹ This is actually a major theme throughout the Shepherd of Hermas text. From an early warning against “doublemindedness”⁴⁰ (which is a constant concern to Hermas) to the concluding parables of schisms (for example, “slanderers . . . never at peace among themselves . . . always causing contentions”⁴¹), the Shepherd of Hermas stands as a powerful witness to the dissensions within the Roman church.

As in Rome and Corinth, Ignatius and Polycarp attest to similar disunity in Syria and Asia Minor. “Flee from division,” Ignatius warned the Philadelphians,⁴³ and “let there be nothing among you which is capable of dividing you, but be united” was his plea to the Magnesians. Rather, “gather together, let there be one prayer, one petition, one mind.”⁴⁴ Ignatius seemed to be convinced that if the church did not unify, there would be disastrous consequences. “Flee the ruler of this age, lest you be worn out by his schemes . . . instead gather together with an undivided heart.”⁴⁵ Unity was also an important message in the other letters of Ignatius,⁴⁶ as well as in the letter of Polycarp.⁴⁷ Of these

passages, one scholar has noted that Ignatius's prayer was not that pagans stop hounding the Christians but rather that the Christians stop fighting one another and that they recover unity.⁴⁸ Others concur and acknowledge that Ignatius went to his death in Rome knowing that the church was splitting.⁴⁹

It is critical to note here that, along with being a major concern for the early church, this disunity is one of the very few references to the ancient apostasy in the entire Doctrine and Covenants. In D&C 64:8 we read, "My disciples, in days of old, sought occasion against one another and forgave not one another in their hearts; and for this evil they were afflicted and sorely chastened." When compared to the early Christian texts, this verse offers an incredibly accurate picture of what largely led to the Great Apostasy.⁵⁰

Worldly distractions. In addition to false teachings and disunity, worldly distractions, including a love of riches, also plagued the early Christian community. According to Polycarp, there were some among the church leadership in Philippi who had sought money above all else. "I warn you, therefore: avoid love of money . . . if a man does not avoid love of money, he will be polluted by idolatry."⁵¹

The situation was even more dramatic in the Roman church. The Shepherd of Hermas indicates that there was a group of wealthy saints who, "whenever persecution comes, they deny their Lord because of their riches and their business affairs."⁵² Apparently, it was even worse among the leadership in Rome. Hermas states that there were church leaders who "plundered the livelihood of widows and orphans, and profited themselves from the ministry which they carried out."⁵³ On another occasion, Hermas saw a vision of a young shepherd over a large flock. The shepherd was dressed in luxurious clothes and was identified as the "angel of luxury and deception. He crushes the souls of God's servants and turns them away from the truth, deceiving them with evil desires . . . for they forget the commandments of the living God and live pleurably in worthless luxury, and are destroyed."⁵⁴ This appears to have been the condition among much of the Roman church leadership in Hermas's day (see also 1 Nephi 13:6-9).

Problems in church leadership. A fourth major concern for the apostolic fathers was the many problems regarding church leadership. This included both leaders who were themselves becoming corrupt and the membership who were not following the legitimate leaders. The situation in Corinth has already been discussed. Here Clement condemned those "who in arrogance and unruliness have set themselves up as leaders in abominable jealousy."⁵⁵ These self-appointed leaders "exalt[ed]

themselves over [the] flock”⁵⁶ and removed the authorized leaders “from the ministry which had been held in honor by them.”⁵⁷

Similar leadership problems are addressed in the Shepherd of Hermas. Indeed, the entire revelation of the text is directed to “the officials of the church, in order that they may direct their ways in righteousness.”⁵⁸ Hermas accuses these officials: “You carry . . . poison in your heart. You are calloused and don’t want to cleanse your hearts. . . . How is it that you desire to instruct God’s elect, while you yourselves have no instruction?”⁵⁹ The theme of apostate leadership in these and other texts, such as the Didache (a late first-century “handbook of church order”), has led one non-Latter-day Saint scholar to note that “as the . . . apostles disappeared and the directly inspired prophets lost their authority, other figures emerged to take command of the churches.”⁶⁰

The understanding of apostasy and restoration. Although the above sampling of early Christian texts reveals some of the serious problems facing the early second-century church, it is important to consider how these issues fit into the apostolic fathers’ understanding of the future of the church. After all, the mere presence of problems does not necessarily mandate an approaching apostasy. However, if it can be demonstrated that the apostolic fathers themselves viewed these problems as catalysts for a developing apostasy, the case can be strengthened for using their writings as witnesses as to how the lights went out of the church.

We cannot be certain how much the Apostles passed on to these leaders concerning the future of the church and relating to an approaching apostasy and eventual restoration.⁶¹ Certain caution is required in this regard. Perhaps we often assume that the early Christians had the same understanding of how events were to develop as those of us with a hindsight view of the establishment of the church, followed by the Great Apostasy and eventual Restoration preceding the Second Coming and the Millennium. In reality, however, it is possible that the apostolic fathers simply understood that there would be a period of darkness for the church in the days ahead (which they could have understood as persecutions, spiritual apostasy, or both) followed by a period of light and renewal (perhaps pointing to the Restoration, the Millennium, or both).

It is clear, however, that these writers knew they were living in a dark time that was far inferior to the days of the Apostles. Ignatius, for example, while enumerating the above problems among his audience, refers to Satan as “the ruler of this age” in more than one letter.⁶² In his Epistle to the Trallians, he decries the false doctrines and leadership problems and connects them to an approaching darkness. “I am guard-

ing you in advance,” he wrote, “because you are very dear to me and I foresee the snares of the devil.”⁶³ It has already been mentioned that Ignatius elsewhere described the church as an “unsuspecting victim” being poisoned.⁶⁴

The author of the Shepherd of Hermas, while focusing on all four of the problems listed above, uses intriguing imagery to describe the darkness that was engulfing the church in Rome. On one occasion, he describes the church of his day as an old lady falling asleep.⁶⁵ Hermas himself offers an interesting explanation as to why the woman-church was fading: “Because your [plural, speaking to the church] spirit was old and already withered, and you had no power because of your weaknesses and double-mindedness.” Here it seems that the state of the woman-church is directly dependent upon the state of its membership. In this case, the weaknesses and double-mindedness of the people are causing her to fall asleep: “For just as old people, no longer having any hope of renewing their youth, look forward to nothing except their falling asleep so also you, being weakened by the cares of this life, gave yourselves over to indifference.”⁶⁶

Along with the problems among the membership, Hermas uses the same language of “falling asleep” that he uses for the Apostles only a few passages earlier. “These are the apostles and bishops . . . who have walked according to the holiness of God. . . . Some have fallen asleep, while others are still living.”⁶⁷ Perhaps Hermas is making another connection, associating the “sleep” of the Apostles with the “sleep” of the woman-church. He goes on to note that the days of the Apostles were the ideal, as “they always agreed with one another, and so they had peace with one another and listened to one another.”⁶⁸ This stands in stark contrast to the church of Hermas’s day.

Another image the Shepherd of Hermas uses to emphasize the problems within the church is a description of the future as a dark and stormy wintertime for the righteous. “For this world [*aion*] is winter to the righteous. . . . Neither the righteous nor the sinners can be distinguished, but all are alike.”⁶⁹ While translated here as “world,” the word *aion* in Greek means a “period of existence,” “an age,” “an era,” or a “definite space of time.”⁷⁰ This is different from the Greek *kosmos*, which means “the world,” as in the physical earth.⁷¹ Therefore, this passage seems to state that Hermas’s “age” is a stormy one for the righteous, as they can no longer be distinguished from the wicked. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that the word *aion* is the same as in Matthew 28:20, where Jesus offers His parting words to the Apostles, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the [*t*, ‘age

or era’].” Perhaps these two texts together demonstrate a continuity of understanding that the era of Christ’s presence within the church would soon come to an end.

The Shepherd of Hermas text also describes a great tribulation to come in the form of a beast.⁷² The beast of his vision, Hermas is told, “is a foreshadowing of the great tribulation that is coming.” Along with the images of the church as an old lady falling asleep or the era being one of darkness, it is not clear whether this is an approaching persecution, the great spiritual apostasy, or both. We can confidently assert, however, that both Ignatius and the Shepherd of Hermas understood the problems within the church of their day as indicative of an approaching period of spiritual darkness.

All is not gloomy for the apostolic fathers, however, as there is also an understanding of a great day to come. The Shepherd of Hermas describes the church of its day as an old lady falling asleep, but it also describes the day when the woman-church rises again in youthful beauty and becomes a glorious virgin awaiting her marriage.⁷³ Whereas the early second century was described as the winter of the righteous, “the age [*aion*] to come is summer to the righteous.”⁷⁴ As with the descriptions of a day of darkness, it is not clear whether these descriptions of a glorious day to come refer to the Restoration, the Millennium, or both. It would be safe not to jump to any conclusions. However, it can be stated with confidence that these writers saw their own day as a day of darkness, and a glorious day of light for the church was yet to come.⁷⁵

Conclusion

This study has attempted to illuminate the early Christian apostasy by examining those who experienced and wrote of its early stages. It is hoped that a clearer understanding has been reached as to how the Apostasy developed. Indeed, when we study the writings of Ignatius, Polycarp, and Clement, as well as the Shepherd of Hermas, it is apparent that the development of the Apostasy was much more complicated than is typically presented. False teachers, disunity, love of riches, and aspiring leaders all contributed to the great falling away of the early second-century Christian church. By the late second and early third centuries, Greek philosophy (notably from the Alexandrian schools) had begun to be assimilated into Christian doctrines, and the creeds of the fourth century and onward officially replaced inspired leadership. However, these aspects of Christian history, often presented as the causes of the Apostasy, are merely the symptoms of an apostasy already

well under way by the middle of the second century.

The true detriment to the early Christian church was, in reality, the more fundamental problems about which we have been warned in our own day (for example, throughout the Doctrine and Covenants). In their illustrations of these problems, the apostolic fathers can be an incredibly valuable resource for our understanding and teaching of how exactly the early Apostasy developed, as well as how those problems could be dangerous for groups and individuals in our dispensation. Indeed, the apostolic fathers knew they were living in a period of darkness, and perhaps all that many of their day could do was eagerly await the glorious period of restoration and light to come at the last day. **RE**

Notes

1. Among the significant Latter-day Saint historical studies of the Apostasy, Elder James E. Talmage's *The Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994) is perhaps the earliest serious attempt. Subsequently, Hugh W. Nibley has certainly pioneered Latter-day Saint scholarship in this area by employing a command of the languages and historical background necessary for proper research. Although his methodology is a clear product of 1930s and 1940s scholarship, his contribution in opening further studies in the field cannot be overstated. His published works on the topic are found in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987) and *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987). These writings discuss early Christian ceremonies of particular interest to Latter-day Saints, including baptism for the dead and the early Christian prayer circle, as well as the eventual impact of philosophy and creeds upon the church. Another more recent work dealing with the relationship between early Christianity and Mormonism is Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christian?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991). Robinson deals with the acceptance of the later creeds by modern mainstream Christian denominations and various comments made by early Christian writers on unique Latter-day Saint doctrines. He also coined the metaphor of the Apostasy as "lights going out of the church," which is employed in portions of this article. Although all of these works (and other competent articles) offer important contributions to apostasy studies, all focus on various aspects of the early Christian period without intending to offer a comprehensive overview. There is much more work that needs to be done, especially, as this article argues, in the writings and contexts of the second-century "apostolic fathers."

2. For a treatment of these New Testament insights, see Kent P. Jackson, "New Testament Prophecies of Apostasy," *11th Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium: The New Testament* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1983). The passages discussed here include Matthew 24:5, 9–11; Acts 20:29–31; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12; 1 Timothy 4:1–3; 2 Timothy 3:1–5, 13; 2 Timothy 4:3–4; 1 Peter 2:1–3; 1 John 2:18; Jude 4:17–18; and Revelation 13:1–9.

3. Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 3.36, in *Eusebius: The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, trans. G. A. Williamson (London: Penguin Books, 1989). When Eusebius is used as a primary source for early Christian his-

tory, it is good to take note of his clear biases. This primarily entails his desire to establish the “orthodox” line of succession. However, with these early apostolic fathers—Ignatius, Polycarp, Papias, and Clement—Latter-day Saints have no reason to doubt that they were indeed in an authoritative line from the Apostles. They were contemporaneously in the same regions as the Apostles, their writings clearly indicate their leadership positions were well established in those regions, and their writings contain teachings and doctrines that would be quite comfortable to a Latter-day Saint reader.

4. Scholarly consensus places the death of Ignatius during the reign of Trajan (AD 98–117). The exact year, however, is difficult to determine. The possible date of AD 107–8 is presented by Eusebius and accepted by W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 124. Others date the martyrdom to the second half of Trajan’s reign, between AD 110 and 117. See Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 131; hereafter cited as *AF*.

5. Walter H. Wagner, *After the Apostles: Christianity in the Second Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 141–42.

6. *AF*, 128.

7. Although this article accepts the more traditional understanding of Ignatius’s place in church history, another view is presented by Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1971), 61–76. Bauer’s thesis throughout his work sharply criticizes claims of the fourth-century church to be the one and true “orthodox” Christianity possessing legitimate apostolic succession, whereas all who disagree in doctrine or practice are to be considered heretical. In reality, Bauer argues, the fourth century “orthodox” church was simply the version of Christianity that won out in the end, allowing them to decide who was heretical and who was orthodox. In Bauer’s effort to push back the “orthodox” conspiracy to as early as possible, his view of Ignatius is not overly flattering. Aspects of this overall thesis are quite intriguing in light of the Latter-day Saint concept of the Apostasy. However, for a Latter-day Saint reader, the writings of Ignatius seem quite solid in matters of doctrine as well as church structure and development. Therefore, perhaps Bauer’s thesis need only be adjusted as to its chronology (that is, possibly reassigning the “orthodox” conspiracy to the period of Irenaeus and Tertullian, immediately following the apostolic fathers).

8. Ignatius, Epistle to the Philadelphians, 7.1–2, in *AF*, 181. For further commentary on Ignatius and the “solid tradition” of the spirit of prophecy within the church at this time, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 148.

9. Wagner, *After the Apostles*, 144–45.

10. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 3.36.

11. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.4, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, 10 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), 1:416; hereafter cited as *ANF*. On another occasion, Irenaeus recalls from personal experience “how [Polycarp] spoke of his intercourses with John and the others who had seen the Lord; how he repeated their words from memory . . . things he had heard direct from the eyewitnesses.” This passage of Irenaeus is preserved and quoted by Eusebius in *History of the Church*, 5.20.

12. Tertullian, *On Prescription against Heretics*, 32, in *ANF*, 3:258.

13. J. Christian Wilson, "Polycarp," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:389–90; hereafter cited as *ABD*. See also *AF*, 202–4.

14. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.3, in *ANF*, 1:416. This passage is also cited in Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 5.6. Earlier in his work, Eusebius also identifies Clement of Rome with the Clement mentioned by Paul in Philippians 4:3, who has his name in the book of life (see *The History of the Church*, 3.4.9). Although the earliest attribution of this traditional connection is found in Origen, factors including geography and chronology bring this tradition into question. See John Gillman, "Clement," in *ABD*, 1:105.

15. Tertullian, *On Prescription against Heretics*, 32, in *ANF*, 3:258.

16. For the current scholarly assessment of Clement's apostolic appointment, see Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 142–43. Here Ehrman discusses the importance of tracing ecclesiastical lineage back to the Apostles who had appointed certain individuals. Clearly, it was important to the early church to note that Christ chose the Apostles, who appointed the leaders of the churches, who then handpicked their successors. Arguments of "apostolic succession" would later be used, as has already been noted, by Irenaeus, Tertullian, and others to refute any other claim to truth outside of "orthodoxy." But by the second and third centuries, many of the bishops in succession had been themselves declared heretical by proto-orthodox theologians. Another treatment of the same topic is found in Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 33. Hall notes the importance of apostolic succession in connection with Clement as an example of how the Apostles appointed the first bishops and gave rules to carry on. However, it is noted that, contrary to later traditional understanding, in the period of Clement, there is as yet no indication that only one bishop presided in Rome or even in Corinth.

17. See Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 142, as well as *AF*, 22–26.

18. For an exhaustive treatment of the text and authorship, see Carolyn Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas: Hermeneia Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999). For other possibilities of dating and authorship, see Graydon F. Snyder, "Hermas, The Shepherd," in *ABD*, 3:148.

19. Although a late second-century dating and a Roman context have long been assigned to the Muratorian Canon, some are now arguing for a later dating (late fourth century, following Eusebius's listing of canonical works). Precise dating is difficult, however, as the fragment containing the listing of canonized works dates to between the seventh and eighth centuries, forcing scholars to debate internal clues. The fragment was discovered in 1740 by L. A. Muratori in Milan's Ambrosian Library. See Gregory Allen Robbins, "Muratorian Fragment," in *ABD*, 4:928–29.

20. *AF*, 328–31.

21. Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis, was also associated with Polycarp and possibly the Apostle John. Although he apparently wrote a five-volume treatise, *The Sayings of the Lord Explained*, preserved only in title by Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.33.4, in *ANF*, 1:563, and Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 3.39, the only writings we now have of Papias are a number of fragmented quotations and references, again by Eusebius. His writings are not given fuller treatment here, as the surviving statements shed little light on the apostasy of the church. They do, however, offer wonderful testimony to the kinds of teachings held sacred by the

early church and, through Eusebian commentary, insight into how such things were treated in the fourth century. For example, the fourth-century Eusebius calls Papias “a man of very small intelligence” because he was simple enough to believe in a literal resurrection and millennium, instead of interpreting such apostolic teachings as “mystic and symbolic” as the enlightened fourth-century church did. Eusebius also admits that a “great majority of churchmen [of Papias’s time and shortly after] took the same view.” In this way, the Papias fragments and Eusebian commentary offer interesting insight into earlier beliefs, becoming allegorized within a few centuries. See Eusebius, *History of Church*, 3.39.

22. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 6–7, in *AF*, 141.

23. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 8–9, in *AF*, 141–43.

24. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Trallians*, 6, in *AF*, 163.

25. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Philadelphians*, 2, in *AF*, 177.

26. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians*, 8, in *AF*, 155.

27. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians*, 11, in *AF*, 157.

28. Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 7, in *AF*, 213–15.

29. For further treatment of the early christological controversies and Ignatius’s role in the debate, see Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 152; *AF*, 128–130; and Hall, *Early Church*, 33.

30. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Sim. 8.6, in *AF*, 461–63. Commentary on these false teachers corrupting the community is found in Osiek, 207.

31. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Sim. 9.22.2, in *AF*, 507. See Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 247, for a discussion on how these teachers were claiming their own authority and spreading their false teachings.

32. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Man. 11, in *AF*, 405–9. Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 140–41, sees this passage as a testimony to the vitality of prophecy in the early church. Some in the church are clearly false prophets, ruining the minds of God’s servants. These false prophets say some things that are true as the devil fills them, that they might be able to break down some of the just. Those clothed in truth, however, will not adhere.

33. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 142–43.

34. Clement, *1 Clement* 1, in *AF*, 29.

35. Clement, *1 Clement* 1, 14, in *AF*, 43.

36. Clement, *1 Clement* 1, 15, in *AF*, 45.

37. Clement, *1 Clement* 1, 46, in *AF*, 81.

38. Clement, *1 Clement* 1, 46, in *AF*, 81.

39. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Vis. 3.6.3, in *AF*, 357.

40. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Vis. 2.2.4, in *AF*, 343. In one important passage, Vis. 3.4.3, some in the tower-church are not receiving revelations because of this doublemindedness.

41. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Sim. 8.7, in *AF*, 463. For further insight into the schisms referred to in this passage, see Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 207.

42. A passage that further elaborates upon the degrees of schisms within the community is Sim. 9.23. See Osiek, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 247. Here we also learn of those who “persist in their backbiting and hold grudges in their rage toward one another.”

43. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Philadelphians*, 2, in *AF*, 177.

44. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians*, 6–7, in *AF*, 155.

45. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Philadelphians*, 6, in *AF*, 181.

46. See Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 2.2, in *AF*, 139. “Join together in a united obedience.” Also *Epistle to the Trallians*, 13, in *AF*, 167. “Love one another . . . with an undivided heart.”

47. Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 10, *AF*, 215. “Stand fast . . . united in the truth.”

48. Wagner, *After the Apostles*, 142.

49. *AF*, 130.

50. See John W. Welch, “Modern Revelation: A Guide to Research on the Apostasy,” unpublished manuscript, 1–4. Another Doctrine and Covenants reference to the Apostasy is in Doctrine and Covenants 86.

51. Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippians* 11, in *AF*, 217.

52. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Vis. 3.6.5, in *AF*, 357.

53. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Sim 9.26.1–2, in *AF*, 509.

54. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Sim 6.1–2, in *AF*, 441–43.

55. Clement, *1 Clement* 14, in *AF*, 43.

56. Clement, *1 Clement* 16, in *AF*, 45.

57. Clement, *1 Clement* 44, in *AF*, 79.

58. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Vis 2.2.6, in *AF*, 343. See also Vis 2.4.2–3, in *AF*, 345.

59. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Vis 3.9.7–10, in *AF*, 363.

60. Hall, *Early Church*, 29–30. Here Hall is focusing mainly on the Didache, which he rightly considers to be an early handbook on church leadership. This text was to offer important guidance about Apostles and prophets, especially how to distinguish the true from the false and protect the church from frauds, as well as to offer doctrinal control. Ultimately, however, although the Didache “envisages a church in which apostles, prophets and teachers lead, toward the end we read a direction of another kind.”

61. A challenge often faced in Latter-day Saint teaching and writing concerning this period is that of avoiding sensationalism and irresponsible scholarship. In our zeal to vindicate the Restoration, we occasionally focus on small details that seem to have modern parallels, when, in reality, these conclusions do not accurately reflect what the text actually conveys. Although there may occasionally be legitimate points made in such an approach, we must be careful not to force an issue but rather allow the early Christian writers to speak for themselves and in their proper context. Indeed, with a call for responsible scholarship, many legitimate and powerful insights may be gained from a serious study of these early Christian leaders writing on the dawn of church-wide apostasy.

62. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians*, 1, in *AF*, 151; *Epistle to the Philadelphians*, 6, in *AF*, 181.

63. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Trallians*, 8, in *AF*, 163.

64. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Trallians*, 6–7, in *AF*, 163.

65. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Vis. 3.10.3., in *AF*, 365.

66. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Vis. 3.11.1–4, in *AF*, 365–67.

67. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Vis. 3.5.1, in *AF*, 355.

68. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Vis. 3.5.1, in *AF*, 355.

69. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Sim. 3, in *AF*, 425.

70. See H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 25.

71. Liddell and Scott, *Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, 446.

72. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Vis. 4.2.5, in *AF*, 371.

73. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Vis 3.10.4–5, in *AF*, 365; 3.12.2–3, in *AF*, 367; 3.13.1–4, in *AF*, 367; 4.2.1–2, in *AF*, 371.

74. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Sim. 4, in *AF*, 425: “For the age [*aion*] to come is summer to the righteous.”

75. It is intriguing to note that Eusebius himself recognizes the church of the second and third centuries to have passed through dark times, only to reemerge triumphant in the fourth century with the victory of the church through Constantine. For the second century and on, Eusebius emphasizes the constant and growing struggle between heresy and orthodoxy in the church. Heresies, schisms, doctrinal differences, as well as the severe persecutions of the third century, all stand in sharp contrast to the peace and unity won for the church in the fourth century. That Constantine emerges victorious and unifies the church by firmly establishing “orthodoxy” inspires Eusebius to employ millennial language. Having just come out of a horrible period of doctrinal and emotional darkness, Constantine brings the light back in the victory of the church. Book 10 of *Eusebius’s History* was written “in celebration of the re-establishment of the churches. . . . Sing to the Lord a new song. . . . After those terrifying darksome sights and stories I was now privileged to see and celebrate such things as in truth many righteous men and martyrs of God before us desired to see on earth and did not see, and to hear and did not hear [note the millennial language of Psalms 46:8–9 and 37:33–36]. . . . From that time on a day bright and radiant, with no cloud overshadowing it, shone down with shafts of heavenly light on the churches of Christ throughout the world” (Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 10.1). The rebuilding and dedication of the churches and the unification of the members of Christ’s body were all declared “in accordance with a prophet’s prediction. . . . There came together bone to bone, and joint to joint [This is a clear reference to Ezekiel’s vision of the Latter-day gathering and restoration in Ezekiel 37]. There was one power of the divine spirit coursing through all the members, one soul in them all.” Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 10.3. His festival oration was that “God . . . bestowed the supreme honour of building His house upon earth and re-establishing it for Christ” (Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 10.4). The rest of Book 10 is full of millennial scriptures. The last paragraph of Eusebius’s work reads, “The mighty victor Constantine, pre-eminent in every virtue that true religion can confer. . . . Old troubles were forgotten, and all irreligion passed into oblivion; good things present were enjoyed, those yet to come eagerly awaited” (Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 10.9). It is fascinating that Eusebius felt the triumph of “orthodoxy” in his day was the great era of light to follow the darkness of the second and third centuries.