1.
Early Church Views

When starting this survey, there was the option to begin with Irenaeus of Lyon. As the next chapter shows, he wrote more systematic theology against a variety of Gnostic heresies. There are, however, some important church writers before Irenaeus who can provide a connection in our understanding of how the concepts of sin, grace and free will were approached between the New Testament writings and the development of more systematic thought.

This chapter will therefore look at these earliest Christian writers, in this case comprising a group known as the Apostolic Fathers – Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, the *Didache*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas* – and the great early apologist, Justin Martyr. Since the New Testament canon was not formally agreed until the Council of Carthage in 419, there was great importance given to the Apostolic Tradition and the developing oral tradition. Given the significance of many authors presented in this chapter, these documents were key in helping the Early Church develop its understanding of God's revelation. A good example of how important these texts were is the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which was accepted as Scripture by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, and included in *Codex Sinaiticus*, an important edition of the Bible from the fourth century.

1 Clement is a letter from the bishop of Rome that was written at the end of the first century to the church in Corinth, with many similarities in style to the letters of the New Testament. It was another early document included in some versions of the New Testament. The authority given to 1 Clement shows the respect that bishops of Rome were gaining in early Christianity. 2 Clement, meanwhile, does not seem to be related to 1 Clement in authorship or style, being a sermon of unknown origin that was retained by the church because of the importance of its teaching.

Although we know little of the life of Ignatius of Antioch, his seven letters are important because they are an important resource in our knowledge of the Early Church, being written shortly before he was martyred in Rome. Polycarp is much better known for his life of faithful service, being martyred at the age of eighty-six after widespread influence in the church in the second century. There is an account of Polycarp's martyrdom written by the church in Smyrna that is a remarkable read. On being challenged to renounce his faith to gain his freedom, Polycarp is reported to have replied, 'For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?'[1]

The last three writings of the Apostolic Fathers are all anonymous. The *Didache*, or *Teachings of the Twelve*, is a collection of writings estimated to date back as far as the middle of the first century. There are indications from several Church Fathers that it was considered to be Scripture for the first few centuries of the church. The *Epistle of Barnabas* was written sometime around the turn of the first century and thus not by the New Testament figure of that name. It deals heavily with Christianity's relationship to Judaism and is a key early document that models the church's developing approach to Old Testament interpretation. The *Shepherd of Hermas* comprises five visions, twelve commandments and ten parables that were given through angelic figures. It was very popular in the early centuries of Christianity as it was simple, clear and practical. Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit do not figure clearly in the text as the Angel of Repentance is the dominant character. The use of 'spirit' in particular is varied, sometimes referring to a human spirit, sometimes something more akin to the Holy Spirit and often somewhere in between. It is not an easy document to work with for those who seek a systematic theology, but it shows how many in the Early Church were drawn to experiential and practical teachings.

Justin Martyr was a great defender of Christianity – an apologist – in the middle of the second century, having converted from paganism and a devotion to Greek philosophy, primarily Plato. Justin's writings are far more voluminous than those of the Apostolic Fathers and could have been treated separately in this book, but the purpose of this chapter is to set the scene for the more extensive presentations in the following chapters.

In terms of their engagement with ideas of sin, grace and free will, it is certainly the first of these that receives the greatest attention. Grace, with its varied use in Scripture continues to be mentioned briefly in relation to the Christian life without any definitive construct being offered. Free will is strongly upheld in the nature of humanity and Christianity, but only Justin Martyr devotes extended sections of his work to this concept.

1. *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 9.

Sin

The presentation of sin can be grouped into several themes beginning with the nature of sin and the relationship between this and humans. The next stage is to look at the cause of sin in humanity, in terms of the first humans, and discussing the effects sin has had on society and Christians. Finally, the Apostolic Fathers are noted for their emphasis on righteousness and works. It is important to highlight this value in relation to sin while recognising that this does not imply salvation by works for the writers.

Justin Martyr addresses a question that seems to have become an issue for the earliest church, about what part of the human sins: the soul, the body or the whole? In *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin presents a discussion on Christianity with a Hebrew who is interested in Greek philosophy. This grants Justin the freedom to examine topics from a variety of perspectives. When dealing with the soul and sin, Justin first distinguishes between animals and humans, claiming that the former are limited in their relationship to God because they do not have souls as humans do:

> 'Do goats or sheep injure any one?'
> 'No one in any respect,' I said.
> 'Therefore these animals will see [God] according to your account,' says he.
> 'No; for their body being of such a nature, is an obstacle to them.'[1]

Following this, Justin Martyr writes that the nature of humanity allows for sin in its differentiation from the nature of God, despite the likeness of nature in the spiritual dimension:

> For those things which exist after God, or shall at any time exist, these have the nature of decay, and are such as may be blotted out and cease to exist; for God alone is unbegotten and incorruptible, and therefore He is God, but all other things after Him are created and corruptible. For this reason souls both die and are punished: since, if they were unbegotten, they would neither sin, nor be filled with folly, nor be cowardly, and again ferocious; nor would they willingly transform into swine, and serpents, and dogs; and it would not indeed be just to compel them, if they be unbegotten.[2]

1. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 4. Later in this chapter of the work, there is a strange response to Trypho's question about what happens to those who have not seen God: 'They are imprisoned in the bodies of certain wild beasts, and this is their punishment.' There is little surrounding material to help us to understand precisely what Justin Martyr is trying to communicate about sin and punishment in this comment.
2. Ibid., 5.

In *On the Resurrection*, which is widely attributed to Justin, there is clear writing on the union of body and soul in sin as in all things:

> The flesh is a sinner, so much so, that it forces the soul to sin along with it. And thus they vainly accuse it, and lay to its charge alone the sins of both. But in what instance can the flesh possibly sin by itself, if it have not the soul going before it and inciting it? For as in the case of a yoke of oxen, if one or other is loosed from the yoke, neither of them can plough alone; so neither can soul or body alone effect anything, if they be unyoked from their communion. And if it is the flesh that is the sinner, then on its account alone did the Saviour come, as He says, 'I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.' Since, then, the flesh has been proved to be valuable in the sight of God, and glorious above all His works, it would very justly be saved by Him.[1]

The nature of sin is therefore seen to involve the corruption of the whole person, body and soul and, as the *Shepherd of Hermas* states, the mind. There are writers later in the history of the church who analyse the role of intention and act in sin, but the basis of the first vision to Hermas is that he sinned in an evil desire towards a young woman who appears to him in his dream:

> And as I prayed, the heavens were opened, and I saw the woman whom I had desired saluting me from the sky, and saying, 'Hail, Hermas!' And looking up to her, I said, 'Lady, what doest thou here?' And she answered me, 'I have been taken up here to accuse you of your sins before the Lord.' 'Lady,' said I, 'are you to be the subject of my accusation?' 'No,' said she; 'but hear the words which I am going to speak to you. God, who dwells in the heavens, and made out of nothing the things that exist, and multiplied and increased them on account of His holy Church, is angry with you for having sinned against me.' I answered her, 'Lady, have I sinned against you? How? Or when spoke I an unseemly word to you? Did I not always think of you as a lady? Did I not always respect you as a sister? Why do you falsely accuse me of this wickedness and impurity?' With a smile she replied to me, 'The desire of wickedness arose within your heart. Is it not your opinion that a righteous man commits sin when an evil desire arises in his heart? There is sin in such a case, and the sin is great,' said she; 'for the thoughts of a righteous man should be righteous. For by thinking righteously his character is established in the heavens, and he has the Lord merciful to him in every business. But those who entertain wicked thoughts in their minds are bringing upon

1. Justin Martyr, *On the Resurrection*, 8.

> themselves death and captivity; and especially is this the case with those who set their affections on this world, and glory in their riches, and look not forward to the blessings of the life to come. For many will their regrets be; for they have no hope, but have despaired of themselves and their life. But do thou pray to God, and He will heal thy sins, and the sins of thy whole house, and of all the saints.'
>
> After she had spoken these words, the heavens were shut. I was overwhelmed with sorrow and fear, and said to myself, 'If this sin is assigned to me, how can I be saved, or how shall I propitiate God in regard to my sins, which are of the grossest character? With what words shall I ask the Lord to be merciful to me?' While I was thinking over these things, and discussing them in my mind, I saw opposite to me a chair, white, made of white wool, of great size. And there came up an old woman, arrayed in a splendid robe, and with a book in her hand; and she sat down alone, and saluted me, 'Hail, Hermas!' And in sadness and tears I said to her, 'Lady, hail!' And she said to me, 'Why are you downcast, Hermas? For you were wont to be patient and temperate, and always smiling. Why are you so gloomy, and not cheerful?'
>
> I answered her and said, 'O Lady, I have been reproached by a very good woman, who says that I sinned against her.' And she said, 'Far be such a deed from a servant of God. But perhaps a desire after her has arisen within your heart. Such a wish, in the case of the servants of God, produces sin. For it is a wicked and horrible wish in an all-chaste and already well-tried spirit to desire an evil deed; and especially for Hermas so to do, who keeps himself from all wicked desire, and is full of all simplicity, and of great guilelessness.'[1]

2 Clement briefly takes this concept further to conscious and unconscious sin, allowing for the latter in encouraging the readers thus:

> And let not us, in our folly, feel displeasure and indignation, whenever anyone admonishes us and turns us from unrighteousness to righteousness. For there are some wicked deeds which we commit, and know it not, because of the double-mindedness and unbelief present in our breasts, and our understanding is darkened by vain desires.[2]

A final theme in the nature of sin extends beyond the individual to the communal. Both 1 Clement and the *Shepherd of Hermas* indicate some kind of corporate element to sin and grace. In the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the elderly woman explains why God is angry at Hermas:

1. *Shepherd of Hermas*, Vision 1.1-2.
2. *2 Clement*, 19.

> But God is not angry with you on account of this, but that you may convert your house, which have committed iniquity against the Lord, and against you, their parents. And although you love your sons, yet did you not warn your house, but permitted them to be terribly corrupted. On this account is the Lord angry with you, but He will heal all the evils which have been done in your house. For, on account of their sins and iniquities, you have been destroyed by the affairs of this world.[1]

Clement writes to the church in Corinth:

> Full of holy designs, and with true earnestness of mind and a godly confidence, you stretched forth your hands to God Almighty, beseeching Him to be merciful to you, if you had been guilty of any involuntary transgression. Day and night you were anxious for the whole brotherhood, that the number of God's elect might be saved with mercy and a good conscience. You were sincere and uncorrupted, and forgetful of injuries between one another. Every kind of faction and schism was abominable in your sight. You mourned over the transgressions of your neighbours: their deficiencies you deemed your own.[2]

We move on now from the nature of sin to the cause of sin. We will start with the first sin of humanity and move on to look at the devil, demons and responsibility for sin. Two texts grant some power to the devil beyond mere temptation in causing the first sin, but it is worth noting that, while they allow dark spirits a role, human responsibility is never forgotten.

In *Hortatory Address to the Greeks*, Justin Martyr speaks of the deception that caused Adam to sin:

> Since, therefore, God knew that the first men remembered the old delusion of their forefathers, whereby the misanthropic demon contrived to deceive them when he said to them, 'If ye obey me in transgressing the commandment of God, ye shall be as gods.' . . . Men, therefore, having been duped by the deceiving demon, and having dared to disobey God, were cast out of Paradise, remembering the name of gods, but no longer being taught by God that there are no other gods.[3]

Justin makes a similar point in the *Dialogue with Trypho*:

> For by this, as I previously remarked, He proclaimed the mystery, by which He declared that He would break the power of the serpent which occasioned the transgression of Adam, and [would bring] to

1. *Shepherd*, V.1.3.
2. *1 Clement* 2.
3. Justin Martyr, *Hortatory Address to the Greeks*, 21.

> them that believe on Him [who was foreshadowed] by this sign, i.e., Him who was to be crucified, salvation from the fangs of the serpent, which are wicked deeds, idolatries, and other unrighteous acts.

Using this as a base, Justin Martyr goes on to discuss the ongoing role of the devil and demons in the experience of humanity since the Fall. He writes extensively on the nature of demons and fallen angels and their relationship to humanity in his *Second Apology*:

> But the angels transgressed this appointment, and were captivated by love of women, and begat children who are those that are called demons; and besides, they afterwards subdued the human race to themselves, partly by magical writings, and partly by fears and the punishments they occasioned, and partly by teaching them to offer sacrifices, and incense, and libations, of which things they stood in need after they were enslaved by lustful passions; and among men they sowed murders, wars, adulteries, intemperate deeds, and all wickedness. Whence also the poets and mythologists, not knowing that it was the angels and those demons who had been begotten by them that did these things to men, and women, and cities, and nations, which they related, ascribed them to god himself, and to those who were accounted to be his very offspring, and to the offspring of those who were called his brothers, Neptune and Pluto, and to the children again of these their offspring. For whatever name each of the angels had given to himself and his children, by that name they called them.[1]

There is thus some power that results for the demons. Justin writes of, 'the evil demons, who hate us, and who keep such men as these subject to themselves, and serving them in the capacity of judges, incite them, as rulers actuated by evil spirits, to put us to death';[2] while the *Epistle of Barnabas*, talks about the two ways of living:

> There are two ways of doctrine and authority, the one of light, and the other of darkness. But there is a great difference between these two ways. For over one are stationed the light-bringing angels of God, but over the other the angels' of Satan. And He indeed (i.e., God) is Lord for ever and ever, but he (i.e., Satan) is prince of the time of iniquity.[3]

However, the fact that this power exists does not mean that temptation is irresistible. The Angel of Repentance tells Hermas, 'for all luxury is foolish and empty in the servants of God. These, then, are the evil desires

1. Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, 5.
2. Ibid., 1.
3. *Epistle of Barnabas*, 18.

which slay the servants of God. For this evil desire is the daughter of the devil. You must refrain from evil desires, that by refraining ye may live to God.'[1] This indicates a need to stand against the devil; a line also found in 2 Clement: 'For I myself, though a sinner every whir and not yet fleeing temptation but continuing in the midst of the tools of the devil, study to follow after righteousness, that I may make, be it only some, approach to it, fearing the judgment to come.'[2]

In addition to this role of the human will resisting temptation, there are also promises of divine assistance, such as this from the Angel of Repentance:

> Return, ye who walk in the commandments of the devil, in hard, and bitter, and wild licentiousness, and fear not the devil; for there is no power in him against you, for I will be with you, the angel of repentance, who am lord over him. The devil has fear only, but his fear has no strength. Fear him not, then, and he will flee from you.[3]

Justin Martyr offers a similar message:

> Though we lived in fornication and all kinds of filthy conversation, we have by the grace of our Jesus, according to His Father's will, stripped ourselves of all those filthy wickednesses with which we were imbued. And though the devil is ever at hand to resist us, and anxious to seduce all to himself, yet the Angel of God, i.e., the Power of God sent to us through Jesus Christ, rebukes him, and he departs from us. And we are just as if drawn out from the fire, when purified from our former sins, and [rescued] from the affliction and the fiery trial by which the devil and all his coadjutors try us; out of which Jesus the Son of God has promised again to deliver us, and invest us with prepared garments, if we do His commandments; and has undertaken to provide an eternal kingdom [for us].[4]

Finally, behind these statements about the limited role of the devil and demons is a determination that sin is the responsibility of humans (and angels in their fall) and this should not be avoided by positing external influence: 'Furthermore, I have proved in what has preceded, that those who were foreknown to be unrighteous, whether men or angels, are not made wicked by God's fault, but each man by his own fault is what he will appear to be'.[5] Clement makes this point clearly to the church in Corinth:

1. *Shepherd*, Commandment 12.2.
2. *2 Clement*, 18.
3. *Shepherd* C.12.4.
4. *Dialogue*, 116.
5. Ibid., 140.

> Hence flowed emulation and envy, strife and sedition, persecution and disorder, war and captivity. So the worthless rose up against the honoured, those of no reputation against such as were renowned, the foolish against the wise, the young against those advanced in years. For this reason righteousness and peace are now far departed from you, inasmuch as 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]

The most complete treatment is found in Justin Martyr's *Second Apology*:

> For so we say that there will be the conflagration, but not as the Stoics, according to their doctrine of all things being changed into one another, which seems most degrading. But neither do we affirm that it is by fate that men do what they do, or suffer what they suffer, but that each man by free choice acts rightly or sins; and that it is by the influence of the wicked demons that earnest men, such as Socrates and the like, suffer persecution and are in bonds, while Sardanapalus, Epicurus, and the like, seem to be blessed in abundance and glory. The Stoics, not observing this, maintained that all things take place according to the necessity of fate. But since God in the beginning made the race of angels and men with free-will, they will justly suffer in eternal fire the punishment of whatever sins they have committed. And this is the nature of all that is made, to be capable of vice and virtue. For neither would any of them be praiseworthy unless there were power to turn to both [virtue and vice]. And this also is shown by those men everywhere who have made laws and philosophised according to right reason, by their prescribing to do some things and refrain from others. Even the Stoic philosophers, in their doctrine of morals, steadily honour the same things, so that it is evident that they are not very felicitous in what they say about principles and incorporeal things. For if they say that human actions come to pass by fate, they will maintain either that God is nothing else than the things which are ever turning, and altering, and dissolving into the same things, and will appear to have had a comprehension only of things that are destructible, and to have looked on God Himself as emerging both in part and in whole in every wickedness; or that neither vice nor virtue is anything; which is contrary to every sound idea, reason, and sense.[2]

The effect of this sin in us is captured well in 2 Clement:

1. *1 Clement*, 3.
2. Martyr, *Second Apology*, 7.

> We were deficient in understanding, worshipping stones and wood, and gold, and silver, and brass, the works of men's hands; and our whole life was nothing else than death. Involved in blindness, and with such darkness before our eyes, we have received sight, and through His will have laid aside that cloud by which we were enveloped.[1]

The *Shepherd of Hermas* speaks of a battle present in the believer between an evil spirit – it is unclear if this is personal (in the sense of a demon) or a distorted human spirit – and a holy spirit (again, the meaning of this is unclear as it does not seem to correspond closely to the Holy Spirit of the New Testament writers). The Angel of Repentance, when speaking to Hermas, is clear that the two spirits cannot coexist well in the same person.

> For if you be patient, the Holy Spirit that dwells in you will be pure. He will not be darkened by any evil spirit, but, dwelling in a broad region, he will rejoice and be glad; and with the vessel in which he dwells he will serve God in gladness, having great peace within himself. But if any outburst of anger take place, forthwith the Holy Spirit, who is tender, is straitened, not having a pure place, and He seeks to depart. For he is choked by the vile spirit, and cannot attend on the Lord as he wishes, for anger pollutes him. For the Lord dwells in long-suffering, but the devil in anger. The two spirits, then, when dwelling in the same habitation, are at discord with each other, and are troublesome to that man in whom they dwell. . . . For when all these spirits dwell in one vessel in which the Holy Spirit also dwells, the vessel cannot contain them, but overflows. The tender Spirit, then, not being accustomed to dwell with the wicked spirit, nor with hardness, withdraws from such a man, and seeks to dwell with meekness and peacefulness. Then, when he withdraws from the man in whom he dwelt, the man is emptied of the righteous Spirit; and being henceforward filled with evil spirits, he is in a state of anarchy in every action, being dragged hither and thither by the evil spirits, and there is a complete darkness in his mind as to everything good. . . . Both these are grievous to the Holy Spirit – doubt and anger. Wherefore remove grief from you, and crush not the Holy Spirit which dwells in you, lest he entreat God against you, and he withdraw from you. For the Spirit of God which has been granted to us to dwell in this body does not endure grief nor straitness.[2]

1. *2 Clement*, 1.
2. *Shepherd*, C.5.1, C.5.2, C.10.2.

Given this emphasis on responsibility, these writers believe that it is incumbent on Christians to pursue righteousness with their whole being. The Apostolic Fathers in particular write massive sections on the need for and nature of Christian righteousness, and have been criticised for this and the comparative absence of grace teaching in their works. Throughout these works, there is a sense that these commandments are the outworking of the reception of the Gospel message. Polycarp states:

> These things, brethren, I write to you concerning righteousness, not because I take anything upon myself, but because ye have invited me to do so. For neither I, nor any other such one, can come up to the wisdom of the blessed and glorified Paul. . . . For if any one be inwardly possessed of these graces, he hath fulfilled the command of righteousness, since he that hath love is far from all sin.[1]

Clement begins his letter to the church at Corinth with a similar exhortation:

> For who ever dwelt even for a short time among you, and did not find your faith to be as fruitful of virtue as it was firmly established? Who did not admire the sobriety and moderation of your godliness in Christ? Who did not proclaim the magnificence of your habitual hospitality? And who did not rejoice over your perfect and well-grounded knowledge? For you did all things without respect of persons, and walked in the commandments of God, being obedient to those who had the rule over you, and giving all fitting honour to the presbyters among you. You enjoined young men to be of a sober and serious mind; you instructed your wives to do all things with a blameless, becoming, and pure conscience, loving their husbands as in duty bound; and you taught them that, living in the rule of obedience, they should manage their household affairs becomingly, and be in every respect marked by discretion.[2]

Likewise, Hermas is told, 'For he who has received remission of his sins ought not to sin any more, but to live in purity . . . if any one is tempted by the devil, and sins after that great and holy calling in which the Lord has called His people to everlasting life, he has opportunity to repent but once. But if he should sin frequently after this, and then repent, to such a man his repentance will be of no avail; for with difficulty will he live'[3] while Justin Martyr writes:

1. Polycarp, *Philippians*, 3.
2. *1 Clement*, 1.
3. *Shepherd*, C.4.3.

> So that it becomes you to eradicate this hope from your souls, and hasten to know in what way forgiveness of sins, and a hope of inheriting the promised good things, shall be yours. But there is no other [way] than this – to become acquainted with this Christ, to be washed in the fountain spoken of by Isaiah for the remission of sins; and for the rest, to live sinless lives.[1]

Clement has the most explicit material on the fact that we are not justified by works, and he then writes about the correct response:

> What shall we do, then, brethren? Shall we become slothful in well-doing, and cease from the practice of love? God forbid that any such course should be followed by us! But rather let us hasten with all energy and readiness of mind to perform every good work. For the Creator and Lord of all Himself rejoices in His works. . . . Having therefore such an example, let us without delay accede to His will, and let us work the work of righteousness with our whole strength.[2]

While this call to righteousness is the result of salvation, there are some passages that indicate merit in relation to sins that have been committed, such as this quote from 2 Clement: 'Good, then, is alms as repentance from sin; better is fasting than prayer, and alms than both; "charity covereth a multitude of sins", and prayer out of a good conscience delivereth from death. Blessed is every one that shall be found complete in these; for alms lightens the burden of sin.'[3] Similarly, the *Didache* teaches:

> Be not a stretcher forth of the hands to receive and a drawer of them back to give. If you have anything, through your hands you shall give ransom for your sins. Do not hesitate to give, nor complain when you give; for you shall know who is the good repayer of the hire.[4]

The topic of sin is thus treated thoroughly in these earliest church writers and from a variety of perspectives. In comparison, the volume of material on grace and free will is much briefer and more isolated.

Grace

The mentions of grace mirror the varied use of the term in Scripture. In the closing of his letter to the church in Smyrna, Ignatius of Antioch sounds distinctly Pauline in two phrases: 'Grace, mercy, peace, and

1. Martyr, *Dialogue*, 44.
2. *1 Clement*, 33.
3. *2 Clement*, 16.
4. *Didache*, 4.

patience, be with you in Christ for evermore. . . . Fare ye well in the grace of God.'[1] Perhaps the strangest use of the word appears earlier in the epistle:

> I write to you by Burrhus, whom ye sent with me, together with the Ephesians, your brethren, and who has in all things refreshed me. And I would that all may imitate him, as being a pattern of a minister of God. Grace will reward him in all things.[2]

The application of grace can be roughly grouped together in three areas: salvation, sanctification and charismata – the gifts of the Holy Spirit; literally, the gifts of grace.[3] The *Epistle of Barnabas* brings these three together most clearly in the opening remarks:

> Seeing that the ordinances of God are great and rich unto you, I rejoice with an exceeding great and overflowing joy at your blessed and glorious spirits; so innate is the grace of the spiritual gift that ye have received. Wherefore also I the more congratulate myself hoping to be saved, for that I truly see the Spirit poured out among you from the riches of the fount of the Lord.[4]

The most extensive writer on the grace of salvation is Clement, who repeatedly returns to that which has been won by the Christ event for those who repent. Early in the letter, he writes:

> Let us look steadfastly to the blood of Christ, and see how precious that blood is to God, which, having been shed for our salvation, has set the grace of repentance before the whole world. Let us turn to every age that has passed, and learn that, from generation to generation, the Lord has granted a place of repentance to all who would be converted to Him.[5]

He follows this up in the next chapter by stating:

> The ministers of the grace of God have, by the Holy Spirit, spoken of repentance; and the Lord of all things has himself declared with an oath regarding it, 'As I live, says the Lord, I desire not the death of the sinner, but rather his repentance.'[6]

The next reference is slightly different, speaking of the 'yoke' of grace, implying that the righteousness that Christians are bound to was noted

1. Ignatius of Antioch, *Smyrnaeans*, 12, 13.
2. Ibid., 12.
3. *Charis* being the Greek word for grace.
4. *Barnabas*, 1.
5. *1 Clement*, 7.
6. Ibid., 8.

above in the section on sin: 'You see, beloved, what is the example which has been given us; for if the Lord thus humbled Himself, what shall we do who have through Him come under the yoke of His grace?'[1]

Later in the letter, Clement clarifies that this salvation by grace denies any teaching that we can work towards our own salvation:

> Let us cleave, then, to those to whom grace has been given by God. Let us clothe ourselves with concord and humility, ever exercising self-control, standing far off from all whispering and evil-speaking, being justified by our works, and not our words. For [the Scripture] says, 'He that speaks much, shall also hear much in answer. And does he that is ready in speech deem himself righteous? Blessed is he that is born of woman, who lives but a short time: be not given to much speaking.' Let our praise be in God, and not of ourselves; for God hates those who commend themselves. Let testimony to our good deeds be borne by others, as it was in the case of our righteous forefathers. Boldness, and arrogance, and audacity belong to those that are accursed of God; but moderation, humility, and meekness to such as are blessed by Him.[2]

He follows this with more teaching on the same lines:

> And we, too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, 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.[3]

Other writers who explicitly mention grace in this context are Polycarp, who begins his letter by writing, '"In whom, though now ye see Him not, ye believe, and believing, rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory;" into which joy many desire to enter, knowing that "by grace ye are saved, not of works", but by the will of God through Jesus Christ',[4] and Ignatius of Antioch in his letters to the Ephesians and Smyrnaeans:

> 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.[5]

1. Ibid., 16.
2. Ibid., 30.
3. Ibid., 32.
4. Polycarp, *Philippians*, 1.
5. Ignatius, *Ephesians*, 11.

> Nevertheless, according to the will of God, I have been thought worthy [of this honour], not that I have any sense [of having deserved it], but by the grace of God, which I wish may be perfectly given to me, that through your prayers I may attain to God.[1]

The two writers compare the grace of the new covenant in Christ with that found in the Old Testament. Ignatius argues that the prophets of the Old Testament were teaching salvation by grace through Christ rather than through the law:

> Be not deceived with strange doctrines, nor with old fables, which are unprofitable. For if we still live according to the Jewish law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace. For the divinest prophets lived according to Christ Jesus. On this account also they were persecuted, being inspired by His grace to fully convince the unbelieving that there is one God, who has manifested Himself by Jesus Christ His Son, who is His eternal Word, not proceeding forth from silence, and who in all things pleased Him that sent Him.[2]

Justin Martyr equates grace in the Old Testament, particularly the grace given to Abraham whereby Christians are saved:

> What larger measure of grace, then, did Christ bestow on Abraham? This, namely, that He called him with His voice by the like calling, telling him to quit the land wherein he dwelt. And He has called all of us by that voice, and we have left already the way of living in which we used to spend our days, passing our time in evil after the fashions of the other inhabitants of the earth; and along with Abraham we shall inherit the holy land, when we shall receive the inheritance for an endless eternity, being children of Abraham through the like faith.[3]

There are two areas of grace that result from this salvation: sanctification and gifts. Ignatius writes about sanctification to the church at Smyrna:

> But consider those who are of a different opinion with respect to the grace of Christ which has come unto us, how opposed they are to the will of God. They have no regard for love; no care for the widow, or the orphan, or the oppressed; of the bond, or of the free; of the hungry, or of the thirsty.[4]

Clement, meanwhile, applies this idea to the church:

1. Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans*, 11.
2. Ignatius, *Magnesians*, 8.
3. Martyr, *Dialogue*, 119.
4. Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans*, 6.

> Let us cleave, therefore, to the innocent and righteous, since these are the elect of God. 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?[1]

Justin Martyr makes a similar point in the *Dialogue*:

> But impute it to your own wickedness, that God even can be accused by those who have no understanding, of not having always instructed all in the same righteous statutes. For such institutions seemed to be unreasonable and unworthy of God to many men, who had not received grace to know that your nation were called to conversion and repentance of spirit, while they were in a sinful condition and labouring under spiritual disease; and that the prophecy which was announced subsequent to the death of Moses is everlasting. And this is mentioned in the Psalm, my friends. And that we, who have been made wise by them, confess that the statutes of the Lord are sweeter than honey and the honey-comb, is manifest from the fact that, though threatened with death, we do not deny His name.[2]

In terms of the gifts of grace, the dominant application is to prophecy, which is made by three separate writers. The *Epistle of Barnabas* contains a brief reference: 'The prophets, having obtained grace from Him, prophesied concerning Him';[3] while the *Shepherd of Hermas* confuses spirit and angelic agency in this context, a result of the nature of the book:

> When, then, a man having the divine spirit comes into an assembly of righteous men who have faith in the divine spirit, and this assembly of men offers up prayer to God, then the angel of the prophetic spirit, who is destined for him, fills the man; and the man being filled with the holy spirit, speaks to the multitude as the Lord wishes.[4]

Justin Martyr writes about grace more in terms of the interpretation of the Scriptures:

> Unless, therefore, a man by God's great grace receives the power to understand what has been said and done by the prophets, the appearance of being able to repeat the words or the deeds will not profit him, if he cannot explain the argument of them. . . . Accordingly He revealed to us all that we have perceived by His grace out of the Scriptures, so that we know Him to be the first-begotten

1. *1 Clement*, 46.
2. Martyr, *Dialogue*, 30.
3. *Barnabas*, 5.
4. *Shepherd*, C.11.

> of God, and to be before all creatures; likewise to be the Son of the patriarchs, since He assumed flesh by the Virgin of their family, and submitted to become a man without comeliness, dishonoured, and subject to suffering.[1]

This brief survey shows that there is little organised teaching about grace at this point in the church's journey, but writers develop some similar themes from the Apostolic Tradition that are in line with teachings in the New Testament.

Free Will

The Apostolic Fathers rarely address free will as a philosophical concept nor link it to the theology that they are teaching. This may be because there was an understood position on the subject, or simply that the nature of their writings, which are more devotional or exhortative, does not naturally lead them into a discussion of this topic. One example of them coming close to discussing free will can be found in Ignatius' letter to the Magnesians, which implies that actions result from being:

> Seeing, then, all things have an end, these two things are simultaneously set before us – death and life; and every one shall go unto his own place. For as there are two kinds of coins, the one of God, the other of the world, and each of these has its special character stamped upon it [so is it also here]. The unbelieving are of this world; but the believing have, in love, the character of God the Father by Jesus Christ, by whom, if we are not in readiness to die into His passion, His life is not in us.[2]

The focus is on the responsibility of believers for their actions, a point reinforced in 2 Clement: '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.'[3]

It is only when we reach Justin Martyr's more systematic approach that we find extended sections that deal with free will. These can be divided into two main groups: firstly, there is the belief that free will is an essential part of created human nature, a core part of human identity; secondly, there is teaching on the nature of God's foreknowledge, with some indication of what this means for human will and responsibility.

1. Martyr, *Dialogue*, 92, 100.
2. Ignatius, *Magnesians*, 5.
3. *2 Clement*, 5.

In his *First Apology*, Justin avows free will in light of the work of the devil and the delay to his punishment:

> For He foreknows that some are to be saved by repentance, some even that are perhaps not yet born. In the beginning He made the human race with the power of thought and of choosing the truth and doing right, so that all men are without excuse before God; for they have been born rational and contemplative. And if any one disbelieves that God cares for these things, he will thereby either insinuate that God does not exist, or he will assert that though He exists He delights in vice, or exists like a stone, and that neither virtue nor vice are anything, but only in the opinion of men these things are reckoned good or evil.[1]

In the *Dialogue*, Justin focuses on the honour that God gives humanity in giving them this freedom of choice, recognising that this entails a willingness to punish when that will is not used correctly.

> Now, we know that he [Jesus] did not go to the river because He stood in need of baptism, or of the descent of the Spirit like a dove; even as He submitted to be born and to be crucified, not because He needed such things, but because of the human race, which from Adam had fallen under the power of death and the guile of the serpent, and each one of which had committed personal transgression. For God, wishing both angels and men, who were endowed with free-will, and at their own disposal, to do whatever He had strengthened each to do, made them so, that if they chose the things acceptable to Himself, He would keep them free from death and from punishment; but that if they did evil, He would punish each as He sees fit. . . .[2]
>
> Could He not have at once created a multitude of men? But yet, since He knew that it would be good, He created both angels and men free to do that which is righteous, and He appointed periods of time during which He knew it would be good for them to have the exercise of free-will; and because He likewise knew it would be good, He made general and particular judgments; each one's freedom of will, however, being guarded. Hence Scripture says the following, at the destruction of the tower, and division and alteration of tongues: 'And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they have begun to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them of all which they have attempted to do.'[3]

1. Martyr, *First Apology*, 28.
2. Martyr, *Dialogue*, 88.
3. Ibid., 102.

The question that this raises, and which Justin addresses, is why does God allow this level of freedom if he foreknows the disastrous consequences that will result? It is interesting that the dominant theme is foreknowledge, rather than predestination, and this allows Justin to maintain a strong line against a Greek idea of fate controlling destiny. A good bridge between created freedom and the theme of God's foreknowledge is found in the *Dialogue*:

> But that you may not have a pretext for saying that Christ must have been crucified, and that those who transgressed must have been among your nation, and that the matter could not have been otherwise, I said briefly by anticipation, that God, wishing men and angels to follow His will, resolved to create them free to do righteousness; possessing reason, that they may know by whom they are created, and through whom they, not existing formerly, do now exist; and with a law that they should be judged by Him, if they do anything contrary to right reason: and of ourselves we, men and angels, shall be convicted of having acted sinfully, unless we repent beforehand. But if the Word of God foretells that some angels and men shall be certainly punished, it did so because it foreknew that they would be unchangeably [wicked], but not because God had created them so.[1]

The fact of God's complete foreknowledge is regularly stated by Justin Martyr: 'For none of you, I suppose, will venture to say that God neither did nor does foresee the events, which are future, nor foreordained his deserts for each one.'[2]

> This has come to pass through the wonderful foreknowledge of God, in order that we, through the calling of the new and eternal covenant, that is, of Christ, might be found more intelligent and God-fearing than yourselves, who are considered to be lovers of God and men of understanding, but are not.[3]

In his *First Apology*, Justin confronts the Greek ideas of fate and seeks to respond from a Christian perspective. The sovereignty of God, with complete foreknowledge, could lead Christians to hold onto a fatalistic determinism that lowers human worth and absolves humanity from the responsibility for sin and its consequences. In successive chapters, Justin deals at length with this issue, upholding God's unique perspective but equally retaining absolute human responsibility:

1. Ibid., 141.
2. Ibid., 16.
3. Ibid., 118.

But lest some suppose, from what has been said by us, that we say that whatever happens, happens by a fatal necessity, because it is foretold as known beforehand, this too we explain. We have learned from the prophets, and we hold it to be true, that punishments, and chastisements, and good rewards, are rendered according to the merit of each man's actions. Since if it be not so, but all things happen by fate, neither is anything at all in our own power. For if it be fated that this man, e.g., be good, and this other evil, neither is the former meritorious nor the latter to be blamed. And again, unless the human race have the power of avoiding evil and choosing good by free choice, they are not accountable for their actions, of whatever kind they be. But that it is by free choice they both walk uprightly and stumble, we thus demonstrate. We see the same man making a transition to opposite things. Now, if it had been fated that he were to be either good or bad, he could never have been capable of both the opposites, nor of so many transitions. But not even would some be good and others bad, since we thus make fate the cause of evil, and exhibit her as acting in opposition to herself; or that which has been already stated would seem to be true, that neither virtue nor vice is anything, but that things are only reckoned good or evil by opinion; which, as the true word shows, is the greatest impiety and wickedness. But this we assert is inevitable fate, that they who choose the good have worthy rewards, and they who choose the opposite have their merited awards. For not like other things, as trees and quadrupeds, which cannot act by choice, did God make man: for neither would he be worthy of reward or praise did he not of himself choose the good, but were created for this end; nor, if he were evil, would he be worthy of punishment, not being evil of himself, but being able to be nothing else than what he was made. . . .[1]

And hence there seem to be seeds of truth among all men; but they are charged with not accurately understanding [the truth] when they assert contradictories. So that what we say about future events being foretold, we do not say it as if they came about by a fatal necessity; but God foreknowing all that shall be done by all men, and it being His decree that the future actions of men shall all be recompensed according to their several value, He foretells by the Spirit of prophecy that He will bestow meet rewards according to the merit of the actions done, always urging the human race to effort and recollection, showing that He cares and provides for men. But by the agency of the devils, death has been decreed against those who read the books of Hystaspes, or of the Sibyl, or of the prophets, that through fear they may prevent men who read them from receiving the knowledge of the good, and may retain them in slavery to themselves; which, however, they could not always effect.[2]

1. Martyr, *First Apology*, 43.
2. Ibid., 44.

There is, therefore, some teaching in these early writings about freedom of will, although it is more implied in the earlier material on sin than explicitly developed in a systematic doctrine of humanity, which only Justin Martyr begins to do. One of the main dangers for this earliest church was the strength of Greek lines of thought. Fatalism was key to this theme and thus Martyr stresses that Christian belief in a sovereign God in no way implies God is involved in the origin or practice of evil. This remains the responsibility of humankind because of their unique created position.

Conclusion

This chapter is important in providing a sense of the progression of Christian thought from the earliest decades of the church, at a time when processing the experience of being a church in a secular society was more important for Christians than the need to develop a systematic theology. In this context, it is the existence and response to sin that provides the major focus in terms of this book. Due to limited space, sections on the need to practice righteousness could not be included. This chapter has highlighted particular teachings on the nature of sin, its causes and the ongoing experience of sin, with the devil and demons playing a major role in the writings but not exerting control over the human psyche.

It is difficult to pick up themes of grace in these works. Instead, sporadic references to the concept can loosely be grouped together under the themes of salvation, sanctification and gifting. Grace seems to be more a reflection on experience rather than something solid underpinning the belief system. Free will is implied rather than stated, although Justin Martyr does sense a need to confront a Greek deterministic worldview head on.

You can find the writings of the Apostolic Fathers and Justin Martyr online at www.earlychristianwritings.com, although a more recent and readable edition is Michael Holmes' *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006). The Justin Martyr quotations come from Volume 1 of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* series, which is available at www.ccel.org, while a more recent version has been published as *The Apologies of Justin Martyr* (London: Aeterna Press, 2015). Michael Holmes' book is useful in providing concise, thorough presentations of the Apostolic Fathers that flesh out the brief introductions given here. Introductions to the thought of these writers are sadly lacking, but fortunately Paul Foster has edited an excellent series of articles entitled

The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2007), which allows the reader to gain a solid foundation for approaching the various thinkers and highlights further reading if one wishes to go deeper into any of the texts.