

# Sin, Grace and Free Will

*A Historical Survey of Christian Thought*

Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers to Augustine



Matthew Knell



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VOLUME I  
The Apostolic Fathers to Augustine

Matthew Knell

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*For Nicola,  
may grace always be at the centre of all that you are.*

# Acknowledgements

The first thanks must go to those writers featured in this book who have wrestled with the revelation of God in their own contexts and in the face of great challenges from culture and philosophy to teach others about the nature of Christian faith concerning sin, grace and free will. I hope that I have treated them honourably in these presentations of their thought and that this work will encourage the wider church, not only those engaged in theological study, to consider these themes from different perspectives to appreciate the riches that are available to us through this great heritage.

For this particular project, I would like to thank all those at the University of Notre Dame that have inspired the writing of these volumes, particularly all those students who have taken the class on sin, grace and free will as they have helped me to process various strands of thought. My thanks also go to the community of the London School of Theology for all the encouragement and support that I receive on a daily basis and especially to Professor Tony Lane for his insight and wise advice as this project developed. I must also thank my two short-term research assistants, George Ioannou and Jonah Knell, who helped work through some of the Apostolic Fathers.

Finally, I am grateful for the patience and love of my family who, given the ongoing work for volumes two and three, are still dealing with the effects of this large-scale research project and who teach me so much about grace through the life we share.



# Introduction

I remember a discussion with some fellow students about life and the choices we make and being shocked when one of them, latching onto this concept of choice, declared that I was an Arminian. At the time, I thought it rather harsh, given that I had not at the time read Arminius' work, or the *Remonstrance* that his followers had compiled, and was not seeking to engage in a seventeenth-century theological discussion, let alone a recent, processed version.

Having now read these texts, and many others concerning the core issues in the four hundred years since the death of Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), I reflect that the appellation was not merely unfair in the context but rather fundamentally incorrect. 'Arminian' has become jargon used by Christians, largely without an understanding of the historical and the theological roots underpinning the concept; the result of which is often that division between individuals and communities increases because the deeply nuanced areas of belief are simplified from a spectrum of greys into a clear 'black and white' alternative.

As a historical theologian, the task of charting the development of beliefs across centuries of Christian thought in different areas of the world, in vastly different historical and cultural contexts, encourages humility in approaching the subject. When reading sources from various periods of Christian history, one recognises a devotion to God's revelation in Scripture, church and experience. Writers throughout history have displayed a Spirit-filled wisdom that seeks to process this in theological and philosophical terms, in a lived-out spirituality, which recognises current challenges, and in practical calls to holy and faithful witness in a broken world.

This does not mean that the Church today should blindly accept the teachings of any one writer in history; there are, however, wise voices that need to be included in our thinking, which support us and challenge us. When I find passages in historical texts that I struggle with, I try

to recognise that instead of taking a judgemental attitude toward my brothers and sisters from the past, I should rather be aware that no one is complete in knowledge and lifestyle; I should question at which point these men and women would have had issues with my faith and life.

This approach creates a complexity to the Christian life; apparent absolutes of faith and thought are often challenged as one considers others who have engaged with these ideas in societies in which Christians have served throughout the history of the Church, these experiences mediated through different languages and systems of thought. There are understandable solutions available today in systematic works that clarify an area of belief for the reader; these books are immensely valuable for those who struggle with an issue, the answer to which is needed to confirm and strengthen them. However, there is a danger, if one is limited to these packaged solutions, that a box forms around how God reveals and relates in any given area, which prevents the majesty of God's dynamic interaction with creation from being understood. This can limit the wonder and worship (and often the confusing complexity) that results from the experience the Church has had of God through history. As a consequence, there is a need to go back to read the original writings of Christians, instead of relying on others to tell us what the texts might have said, to enrich our beliefs and our lives.

There is thus a general inspiration to present directly the thought of great Christian writers through history. In terms of the precise themes of this work – sin, grace and free will – the decision to write this book came from a course that I developed to teach for Notre Dame University at their global gateway in London. A key aspect of the course I created had to be the historical development of thought. The themes of sin, grace and free will seemed, in their inter-relationship, to offer a broad scope, which could engage the students in some interesting debates. While seeking to prepare the course structure and materials, however, it soon became clear that these areas of thought generally had not been dealt with over a broad span of history but were either focused on particular debates – Augustine and Pelagius, Calvinists and Arminians – or were presented systematically with references to particular points supporting the view expressed.

Throughout the course of my own studies and then my teaching, I had been aware of the richness of thought that exists and I resolved to encourage the students to engage directly with the primary sources. The issue this posed was that, given the time for reading assigned and the fact that thought on sin, grace and free will was often embedded in writing about wider topics, only a limited amount could be read, which often involved engaging with, at best, tangentially relevant material.

I therefore decided to create this reader on sin, grace and free will, through looking at the works of some of the most prominent theologians in the history of the church, extracting the relevant passages and organising them thematically to give focused access to the development of thought about these themes. The intention is twofold: firstly, as indicated above, to help readers to recognise the breadth and depth of thought in these areas by Christians from different backgrounds, working in different contexts, to guard against an over-simplification, which would say one point of view is 'right' and another is 'wrong'; and, secondly, to encourage people to go beyond the quotations provided here, back to the original texts that interest them to study their work in greater detail – to this end, each chapter ends with links to the primary sources. In addition, the quotations here come from the most easily accessible editions of the works, generally speaking, those that are freely available online, in order that those who wish to move from the thought here to the context of the original works will be able to recognise the quotation that they are working from. There are two main drawbacks from working this way: the lack of gender-neutral language and the use of some arcane terms, but the intention to encourage the reader beyond this work, to the original sources, is more important than seeking the latest editions available.

I have sought to include the most prominent theologians in this volume from the first thousand years of the Church but others will undoubtedly highlight omissions they consider worthy: St Jerome, Cyprian of Carthage, Ambrose of Milan, for example. A book of this size is necessarily limited in the number of sources with which it can engage; there will always be the regret that more could not be included. I decided to group the Greek Fathers together because there is a general unanimity of thought on these concepts. Augustine of Hippo has been divided into two chapters, early and late, since there are discernible changes in his thought on sin, grace and free will as he confronted different groups.

In terms of the three main subjects studied here, the aim is to present sin, grace and free will as the writers use these concepts, rather than comparing their ideas to any preconceived definition. For two of the three, there are areas that need highlighting in this regard. Grace has become tied, in certain traditions, closely with particular aspects of Christianity – salvation, sacraments, spiritual gifts – but no assumptions are made here about what grace entails. The use of grace in biblical texts is so varied that a definitive reduction of its application would seem counter-intuitive. Free will is another problematic term, particularly in the Latin tradition where there are two phrases (*libera voluntas*, free will, and *liberum arbitrium*, free choice), which are used, and often translated, as 'free will', although they

can have very particular, nuanced differences. This work is not aimed at a postgraduate level at which an understanding of this is vitally important; therefore individual instances where one or other Latin word is used are not noted. As a basic introduction to the difference between the two, the will is the core motivation or value, whereas a choice is the realisation of the will in an action. A choice is therefore more contextually limited than the fundamental orientation of a person's will.

This volume begins with a chapter on the Early Church Fathers, some of whose writings were considered for inclusion in the New Testament (indeed, some were part of New Testament canons until the end of the fourth century). These writings, with the exception of Justin Martyr, were not systematic treatments of Christian thought but are included here to act as something of a bridge between the New Testament and the history of theology, showing how the concepts of sin, grace and free will were treated in the earliest writings. Following this, three key early theologians are studied in depth – Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen – in which we see the development of theological thought, generally in response to perceived incorrect teachings from groups that were overly reliant on current philosophical or religious teachings but differed from that received from the Apostles. At this stage, the New Testament was still in the process of formation and thus the oral tradition maintained an authority alongside the written tradition until at least 200 CE.

After these three writers, the centre of theological thought was firmly rooted in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, written in Greek and largely aimed at clarifying the doctrine of God. The chapter looking at the Greek Fathers surveys a number of different writers from the late fourth to the early sixth centuries, who were largely agreed in their teaching on sin, grace and free will. The last of the Greek Fathers, John of Damascus, who wrote in the early eighth century, is also included here. Finally, the work of Augustine of Hippo is discussed in two chapters covering his early and late work. He is the most influential theologian in the history of the church because of his defining role in the development of western thought. The split is not simply down to chapter size limitations, but the transition in his thought across all three areas. This was influenced by his switch from confronting the thought of the Manicheans to the Pelagians and addressing the different bases of theology. The Epilogue looks briefly at two later works – the canons of the Council of Orange and the work of John Scottus Erigena – that demonstrate how the western church engaged with Augustine in the centuries between his death and the twelfth-century renaissance that saw the birth of the scholastic movement.

## I.

# 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?'<sup>1</sup>

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.’<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.'<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>1</sup>

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’;<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.'<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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].<sup>4</sup>

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'.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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'<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.’<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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.'<sup>6</sup>

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.