GETTING TO KNOW THE CHURCH FATHERS

An Evangelical Introduction

Bryan M. Litfin

SECOND EDITION

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whom I describe with the words Tertullian used of his own wife:
   
dilectissima mihi in Domino conserva.
TIMELINE

BC

800   Founding of Carthage
753   Founding of Rome
658   Founding of Byzantium
347   Death of Plato
332   Alexander the Great’s conquests; founding of Alexandria
322   Death of Aristotle
300   Founding of Antioch
52    Julius Caesar conquers Gaul
43    Founding of Lugdunum (Lyons)
27    Caesar Augustus becomes the first Roman emperor

The Birth of Christ
AD

33    Death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
30s–60s  Events of the book of Acts
100–165  Life of Justin Martyr
100+   Gnostic heresy widely preached
115    Ignatius of Antioch travels to his martyrdom
130–202  Life of Irenaeus of Lyons
140    Marcion begins preaching heresy in Rome
156    Polycarp of Smyrna martyred
170–215  Life of Tertullian of Carthage

Church fathers indicated with italics.
Some lifespan dates are approximate.
177  *Blandina* and her companions martyred at Lyons and Vienne
180  Martyrdom of the *Martyrs of Scilli*
182–203  Life of *Perpetua of Carthage*
185–254  Life of *Origen of Alexandria*
203  *Perpetua*, *Felicity*, and companions martyred; Origen’s father *Leonides* martyred
250  Emperor Decius decrees a severe persecution of Christians
251–356  Life of the monk *Anthony of Egypt*
265–339  Life of *Eusebius of Caesarea*
300–373  Life of *Athanasius of Alexandria*
303  Emperor Diocletian initiates the Great Persecution
306–373  Life of *Ephrem the Syrian*
312  Emperor Constantine victorious at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge; Donatist schism erupts in North Africa
313  Emperors Constantine and Licinius issue the Edict of Milan
318  Arius begins preaching heresy
325  Council of *Nicaea* defines the Trinity
330  Emperor Constantine refounds Byzantium as Constantinople
337  Death of Emperor Constantine
349–407  Life of *John Chrysostom*
350–428  Life of *Theodore of Mopsuestia*
354–430  Life of *Augustine of Hippo*
367  Easter Letter of *Athanasius* lists the biblical canon
378–444  Life of *Cyril of Alexandria*
381  Council of Constantinople supports the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity
387  Baptism of *Augustine of Hippo*
390  Death of *Diodore of Tarsus*
402  Pelagius begins preaching heresy
410  Alaric the Goth invades Rome
428  Nestorius becomes bishop of Constantinople
431  Council of *Ephesus* condemns the doctrines of Pelagius and Nestorius
435–460  Approximate years of *Patrick’s* ministry in Ireland
440–461  Papacy of *Leo the Great*
451  Council of Chalcedon defines orthodox Christology
476  Last Roman emperor in the West deposed by a barbarian lord
500  End of the Roman Empire and the Ancient Period; beginning of the Medieval Period
INTRODUCTION

When someone asks me what I do for a living, and I say I’m a professor whose academic expertise is the early church fathers, I’ve become accustomed to receiving a curious expression. If the person is a stranger, I often ask if he or she is a Roman Catholic because Catholics have been exposed to the fathers of the church. But evangelical Christians often haven’t. “Would that be someone like Jonathan Edwards?” one friend asked me, referring to the colonial American theologian. “Earlier than that,” I replied. “From the Roman Empire.” Most Christians today haven’t met the fathers. Perhaps they’ve heard of St. Augustine, but that’s about it. If this is true in your case, I believe you’re missing something valuable. For many readers of this book, this will be your first real encounter with the ancient Christian writers. And so you have embarked on a journey of discovery. To convey that sense of discovery to the students I teach, I use an illustration about a boy I call Billy.

Little Billy loved his grandmother very much. His childhood years were filled with visits to her house after school or on Sunday afternoons. Grandma always gave him something delicious for a snack: not the carrot sticks or yogurt Billy’s mother insisted on at home, but a big slice of warm apple pie melting the ice cream on top, or Toll House cookies still gooey from the cooling rack. Grandma had a swing out back, an old-fashioned one, not as safe as modern plastic swing sets. It was just a frayed rope looped around a tree limb far above, running through a plain board seat down low. When you really got it going, it would swing in long, stomach-churning arcs while the tree creaked ominously in protest. If while playing in the yard Billy happened to fall and scrape a knee, Grandma was there with some grandmotherly concoction to tend his wound—though her comforting words actually accomplished far more as a remedy. Billy just loved going to his Grandma’s house. She always
lavished care and concern on him, giving her undivided attention to whatever he might be interested in at the moment.

But as he became a teenager, Billy’s visits to Grandma’s house became less frequent. He had his driver’s license now, and his schedule was filled with sports and activities. His friends, both male and female, demanded more and more of his time. Of course, he still loved Grandma and always dutifully wrote her a thank-you note for the birthday cards she insisted on filling with cash. Yet as the years went by, his visits to Grandma’s house began to come only at Christmas, if at all. An occasional phone call kept him current with his “grandson responsibilities” and eased his conscience. But soon Bill was a young adult with a demanding career, a family, and a life of his own.

For this reason Grandma’s death came as something of a shock to him. He hadn’t really noticed her declining health—though he could have if he had paid closer attention. Her funeral service did not bring closure but left Bill with many lingering questions. The responsibility fell to him to dispose of Grandma’s possessions and sell her house. The process caused him to reflect in new ways on his grandmother, and indeed his whole family line. “Who was this woman?” he wondered. “Where did she come from? What people and values shaped her world?” It dawned on Bill that while Grandma had shown great interest in every minor preoccupation of his life, he had never really known her as a person. He began to regret that in a profound way.

One day Bill was cleaning out his grandmother’s attic. The door to the attic led from the guest room—the very room where he used to spend the night whenever his parents were out of town. He had seen that door many times, often imagining the fearsome monsters that might lurk behind it. But he had never done more than peek through the door frame (always in the light of day, of course). Now he opened the door for the first time with adult eyes. Dust particles swirled in the single shaft of sunlight coming from a small window. The air was musty and close. Bill’s eyes fell on a large object in the far corner. It was a cedar hope chest, the kind that, back in the old days, young women always received before they got married. Bill opened it with hushed expectation, like a pirate in the stories Grandma used to tell, discovering long-lost treasure.

The chest was indeed filled with treasure—though not the kind made of silver and gold. Bill first picked up an old baseball glove, which smelled of rich leather and oil. His deceased grandfather’s name was handwritten on it. So Grandpa had been a baseball player? “One of the finest,” his grandmother seemed to whisper to him. Next he examined a necklace with a finely crafted ivory locket hanging from the chain. Inside were two small pictures of Grandma and Grandpa. On the back it was engraved with the words, “Until I return.” But Grandpa had not returned from the war. A framed picture of Grandpa in
his uniform reminded Bill of what a handsome fellow he had been in his day. Looking at another portrait, Bill wondered who this pretty girl might be—wait a minute—could it be Grandma? Bill was so used to her round, wrinkly face that it was startling to think of her as an attractive young woman with love interests of her own. An album full of photographs, now yellowed with age, told the whole story. It was a story filled with all the joys and sorrows, the light moments and memorable occasions, of lives lived in the real world.

At the bottom of the hope chest lay one more thing: a leather-bound family Bible with Grandma’s name inscribed on it. As Bill leafed through the delicate pages, he discovered marginal notes and scraps of paper brimming with her prayers, wise observations, and private spiritual longings. Moisture gathered in Bill’s eyes as he remembered how Grandma had offered him some of these same Christian observations—but only rarely, for he had typically been disinterested in such matters, too quick to run off to the next game or activity. As he sat on his knees in front of the old hope chest, a single thought dominated Bill’s mind: “Why didn’t I take the time to explore this legacy when I had a chance? I never knew I had such a meaningful family heritage!”

The story of little Billy reminds us how easy it is to let the past be crowded out by the urgencies of the present and the opportunities of the future. This is true in many realms, church history among them. The church fathers often are treated as once-beloved ancestors who have been forgotten today. Their world is a vague memory, their presence an awareness we possess only in the most fleeting of ways. We know there were famous Christians who lived “back then,” but we can’t quite put a finger on who they were or what they did. Something about being thrown to the lions and the Romans and all that, right? Yet despite our indifference to their world, we are inextricably bound to the church fathers. They are our spiritual ancestors, for better or for worse. Just like the family tree we inherit, we are their descendants whether we like it or not. It is easy enough to go through life like Bill: with a vague awareness of the past yet too busy with present responsibilities to think much about something as intangible as our “heritage.” But like Bill, we would be missing some real treasures if we did not explore our Christian origins. To do that, we first need to realize that the opening actors in the Christian drama were flesh-and-blood people who lived their lives in God’s presence just as we do today.

The Mighty Deeds of Christian History

Most Christians who have been exposed to the early church fathers probably have seen them marshaled as evidence for one theological argument or another.
Too often a snippet from an ancient writer is yanked out of context to support a modern viewpoint. Such an approach is unfair to authors who never intended that their writings be excerpted out of their whole corpus to serve as ammunition in a future-day war of words. Yet this misuse of the ancients is not the biggest problem here. At a more basic level, it misses the very nature of the Christian faith itself—at least the faith as the church fathers understood it. For them, Christianity was not simply about doctrines. That’s not to say they ignored doctrines. Indeed, great theological struggles were waged over the doctrinal difference made by a single Greek letter. But, for the fathers, Christianity was not a collection of abstract ideas or secret wisdom that could be gathered in a manual and memorized. Instead it was a story, an account of things that have happened in the arena of human history on earth. In his book *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (a book well worth reading for the interested newcomer to the church fathers), Robert Wilken writes,

> I am convinced that the study of early Christian thought has been too preoccupied with ideas. The intellectual effort of the early church was at the service of a much loftier goal than giving conceptual form to Christian belief. Its mission was to win the hearts and minds of men and women and to change their lives.

Wilken is saying that Christianity is a real-world, event-oriented religion. Why? Because its very epicenter is the God-Man who came to us in time and space, bridging the nonmaterial and the material in himself. The Bible is replete with historical people and places and names, all of which give structure to its cosmic narrative of creation, fall, promise, redemption, and restoration. The Christian religion tells the story of what God does, and especially what he does in the Lord Jesus Christ as people come into relationship with him.

When Caesar Augustus rose to power as the first Roman emperor around the time of Christ’s birth, he sponsored a work celebrating his exploits called the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, the “things accomplished by the Divine Augustus.” The emperor’s successor, Tiberius, caused the *Res Gestae* (pronounced “race-gest-aye”) to be inscribed on buildings throughout the empire to proclaim the mighty achievements of his stepfather. In a similar way, the Christian faith recounted the earliest believers’ own sort of divine *res gestae*.³ Far more than


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a set of doctrinal propositions, Christianity gave an account of the mighty deeds accomplished by God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Lord God has triumphed over the forces of evil and is carrying human history to its conclusion, just as he has been doing since the first day of creation. The ancient church was an eyewitness religion, attested by people who had seen and heard the great things God has done. Therefore, for those early believers, people and events mattered more than abstract ideas. Or, to put it differently, central Christian ideas were always tied to actual events that had transpired in our world. Therefore, this book will focus on several key church fathers as individual personalities. Many books have been written on the history of Christian doctrines or important themes in early church history, but in this book, I hope to introduce you in a more personal way to some of your spiritual ancestors. I want to help you get to know some folks who are part of your own spiritual legacy and heritage in the faith.

What Is a “Church Father”?

Before we begin, let’s clear something up. We will be calling the people we meet “the church fathers.” What do we mean by this designation? In the realm of everyday experience, a father is, by definition, someone who came before us. A father’s children are genetically linked to him as his descendants. No matter what our actual human fathers may have been like, most of us can grasp the concept of an ideal father figure. He is a man who, having walked the path of life already, guides his children in wisdom. This is the idea behind the term “church fathers.” They are a previous generation of believers who continue to guide their spiritual descendants in the Christian church today. The term “fathers” was even used in this sense by the later writers of the ancient period to refer to the earliest generations of believers. So it is a term with much antiquity behind it.

One immediate question might spring to mind: What about the church mothers? Were there no women who contributed anything to early Christianity? The truth is there were many great women in the ancient church. The early Christians often lauded the noble and heroic qualities of female saints, especially martyrs and virgins who lived consecrated lives before God. Yet we must remember that in ancient society, women rarely were taught to read and write, and certainly were not expected to produce intellectual literature. For this reason, few women’s writings have come down to us today from the early church period. In this book we will use the term “church fathers” as a kind of standard designation, while remembering that many Christian “mothers”
contributed greatly to church history as well. To help keep this in mind, we will be looking at one of the few surviving ancient texts actually penned by a woman: the account of the noblewoman Perpetua, who went to her death by martyrdom in AD 203.

In modern times, the academic study of ancient Christians has been called “patristics” or “patrology,” which comes from the Latin word for father (pater). This term has fallen out of favor recently due to its masculine and overly churchy connotations and has been replaced with the expression “early Christian studies.” The reasons for this are understandable in academia. Even so, I am not quite ready to lose the parental analogy. Perhaps we can still recognize that the earliest Christian leaders, both male and female, serve as spiritual parents for believers today. In this interpretation, the word “patristics” would describe the concept of ancient fathers and mothers who guide our theology and model for us what it means to live a holy life.

We should recognize, of course, that the scholarly definition of “early Christian studies” would certainly include ancient figures who were deemed by later generations to be heretics. In an academic setting, all historical documents are valid sources for inquiry into Christian beginnings, no matter how sketchy their theology may be. Scholars today do not attempt to pass judgment on a given writer’s “orthodoxy.” That being said, the present book is more directly concerned with those figures whose lives and teachings are considered to be acceptable by the witness of historic, orthodox Christianity—in other words, with those writers who are the forefathers and foremothers of our own faith.

One of the most influential systematizers of the modern study of ancient Christianity is Johannes Quasten. In his four-volume work Patrology, which discusses every Christian writer from the ancient period (whose texts have survived), Quasten defines the “fathers” as the Christian writers from New Testament times up until Isidore of Seville (AD 636) in the Latin world and John of Damascus (AD 749) in the Greek world. While such later writers certainly had much in common with their forebears in the Roman Empire, most historians would consider the AD 600s and 700s to be well into the period we would call “early medieval” or “Byzantine.” In this book, we will be looking at twelve writers who lived before the year AD 500, which is approximately the time of the fall of Rome and the end of the ancient period.


Are we correct in thinking of these ancient writers as our spiritual “fathers”? Perhaps this sounds like the Roman Catholic practice of referring to priests in this way. Or we may recall the words of Jesus: “And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven” (Matt. 23:9). It is important to understand what Jesus is saying here. In context he is discussing the hypocrisy and pride of the Pharisees, whose outward pretensions (such as receiving a greeting as an esteemed rabbinic father-figure) would replace heartfelt obedience to God. Note that Jesus also says we should not call someone our “teacher” or “instructor,” yet we have no problem using those titles today. Obviously it was not the title that mattered to the Lord but the way it was used in such hypocritical religion. There is no problem with referring to someone as our “father” if it is done in the right way. Indeed this is exactly what Paul did in 1 Corinthians 4:15 when he said, “For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Both Paul and John frequently referred to their converts as their children.

The idea of one’s spiritual mentor serving as a father figure was very common in the ancient world. The second-century Christian leader Irenaeus wrote, “For when any person has been taught from the mouth of another, he is termed the son of him who instructs him, and the latter [is called] his father.” Likewise the ancient church teacher Clement of Alexandria wrote, “We call those who have instructed us, fathers.” A few lines later Clement adds, “Everyone who is instructed is, in respect of subjection, the son of his instructor.” The early church historian Eusebius even took the title “son of Pamphilus” from the man who was his intimate friend and mentor. In the same way, perhaps we can learn to think of the “church fathers” as those who came before us and who still play a guiding role in our lives.

5. Irenaeus, Against Heresies 4.41.2. The quotation is taken from vol. 1 of the 10-volume set called the Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF). The ANF, along with the two series known together as the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF1 and NPNF2), probably serve as the easiest way for the beginning reader to access the patristic sources. Most theological libraries have the entire 38-volume set of the ANF and NPNF, and it is also available online at http://www.ccel.org/fathers.html. The translations are antiquated and based on less reliable manuscript evidence. Nevertheless, the set is widely available, and for that reason I quote from it in this book whenever possible.


7. Pamphilus set an example for Eusebius by dying as a martyr, as described in Eusebius’s Church History, Martyrs of Palestine, 11 (NPNF2 1:351–54). This document is appended to Book 8 of the Church History. Prior to Pamphilus’s martyrdom, Eusebius visited him in prison for two years. His affection for his “father” is evident in the many warm things Eusebius had to say about him.
It has become customary to delineate four main criteria to identify a “father of the church”: they must be ancient, orthodox in doctrine, holy in life, and approved by other Christians. Such a perspective can already be seen in a fifth-century writer named Vincent, a monk from Île Saint-Honorat, one of the charming Lérins Islands off the southern coast of France. Vincent wrote an influential treatise that attempted to define orthodoxy and distinguish it from heresy. His famous dictum advises us to accept “what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.” Vincent saw the Christian faith as being held in trust by the “fathers” who have passed it down to posterity. He based this principle on Deuteronomy 32:7: “Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you.” Vincent described the church fathers as those who “lived and taught with holiness, wisdom, and constancy,” and “who, each in his own time and place, remaining in the unity of communion and of the faith, were accepted as approved masters.” How unfitting it would be for us, he says, to reap weeds today where our forefathers had planted wheat! With great eloquence Vincent writes,

Therefore, whatever has been sown like a seed through the faithfulness of the Fathers in the cultivation of God’s Church, this ought to be pruned and taken care of by the industry of their children, it ought to flourish and ripen, it ought to advance and go forward to perfection. For it is right that those ancient doctrines of heavenly philosophy should, as time goes on, be cared for, smoothed, polished; but not that they should be changed, not that they should be maimed, not that they should be mutilated.

Along with Vincent of Lérins, perhaps we can now define the “church fathers” as those who lived righteously and passed down to later generations the core principles of the Christian faith that they themselves had received from the apostles. In other words, the church fathers and mothers are those men and women whose beliefs and lifestyles were consistent with what is recorded as the apostolic teaching found in the Scriptures. Thus the ancient fathers provide us with the first links of continuity to our Christian past.

8. For this fourfold list, see, e.g., Boniface Ramsey, Beginning to Read the Fathers (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 4–7; Christopher A. Hall, Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 51–55; and Hall’s follow-up work, Learning Theology with the Church Fathers (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 20–21.

10. Ibid., 72 (NPNF 11:152, slightly adapted for clarity).
11. Ibid., 77 (NPNF 11:154).
12. Ibid., 57 (NPNF 11:148, slightly adapted for clarity).
Misconceptions about the Church Fathers

As we get acquainted with some of our spiritual ancestors, I would like to address a few common misconceptions held by many evangelical Christians. These are some of the most prevalent errors I have run into as I talk with other believers about the church fathers.

Misconception #1: The church fathers were not biblical. Many believers today associate the sayings of the church fathers with the nebulous concept of “tradition.” Patristic teachings and creeds are sometimes referred to as “the doctrines of men,” as opposed to the divine revelation given in Scripture. Now it is certainly true that the writings of the fathers are susceptible to error, while the Bible alone is the inspired, inerrant Word of God. But the fact that the fathers are fallible human beings does not mean everything they wrote is therefore wrong. They may well have had some wise and profitable insights that square nicely with biblical revelation.

The problem comes when we view everything through the lens of the Reformation era, when Scripture and tradition became two distinct sources of truth. The Council of Trent said in 1546 that the Bible and the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church are both to be venerated with the same feeling of piety and reverence.  


14. Pope Paul VI, Dei Verbum 9. It is always best when discussing Roman Catholicism to work with what the church’s actual documents say and teach, instead of relying on Protestant characterizations. Roman Catholic doctrine is nicely summarized in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (see §§80-83 on the subject of Scripture and tradition). The catechism or Dei Verbum can be found online by performing an internet search on these words, then clicking the authoritative link at http://www.vatican.va.

The Fathers could not have conceived of “tradition” (that which is handed down) as being contradictory to the Bible since all the church’s truth ultimately came from God himself. The Father sent Jesus to reveal divine truth, and Jesus shared this truth with the apostles. The apostles then preached the gospel to the world verbally and wrote about the
Christian faith in the inspired Scriptures. This entire apostolic deposit of faith is exactly what the early fathers intended to embrace in their churches. So “tradition” was not a term opposed to Scripture. It was the very possession of Scripture and tradition that distinguished the orthodox from the heretics, who could not trace themselves back to the original faith handed down since the apostolic times.

The truth of the matter is that the church fathers loved the Scriptures immensely. You cannot read the fathers without immediately noticing how the pages of their writings reverberate with scriptural quotations and themes. Scripture was in the very air they breathed; it was what nourished their souls. Athanasius, the fourth-century bishop at Alexandria in Egypt, listed the books of the Bible and then said about them, “These are the fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness.”

Origen, who also lived at Alexandria about a century earlier, was so devoted to scriptural study that he produced by dictation more than two thousand written works, including commentaries, sermons, theological treatises, and a scholarly edition of various biblical manuscripts. For this task Origen needed more than seven scribes working together in shifts to keep up with their master’s prodigious output.

Many of the fathers’ writings are so full of Scripture you can scarcely read a single paragraph without coming across a biblical citation or allusion. To keep track of it all, modern scholars use a multivolume reference work called Biblia Patristica, which is filled with page after page of small-print Bible verse references found in various early church writings.

Robert Wilken sums up his lifetime of patristic study this way:

What has impressed me most is the omnipresence of the Bible in early Christian writings. Early Christian thought is biblical, and one of the lasting accomplishments of the patristic period was to forge a way of thinking, scriptural in language and inspiration, that gave to the church and to Western civilization a unified and coherent interpretation of the Bible as a whole.

16. Eusebius, Church History 6.23.2 (NPNF² 1:271).
17. Biblia Patristica is a French work that uses Latin, so it is not very accessible to the nontechnical reader. Some other helpful tools for accessing patristic biblical exegesis are the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, ed. Thomas Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), and The Church’s Bible, ed. Robert Wilken (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). See also Charles Kannengiesser, The Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianty (Leiden: Brill, 2004); and Frances M. Young, “Interpretation of Scripture” in Harvey and Hunter, Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies, 845–63.
While the church fathers’ interpretive principles and worldview may have been different than ours, we certainly cannot accuse them of being out of touch with the Scriptures. They were indeed people of the Book!

Misconception #2: The church fathers were Roman Catholics. Once again, we commit the error of anachronism if we read our later concept of “Roman Catholic” back onto the church fathers. Instead, we should understand what they meant when they called themselves “catholic.” I am convinced many Christians today are being robbed of their ancient heritage precisely because they have equated the word “catholic” with being “Roman Catholic.” Too often the terms get confused, but they do not mean the same thing.

In a course I teach on church history, we begin each class hour by reciting the Apostles’ Creed together. This creed includes a confession of belief in “the holy catholic church.” One time a student told me that when she reported this to her father, he became upset because of the word “catholic” in the creed. The student’s father was not alone in his misunderstanding. No doubt this same confusion is reflected in the fundamentalist churches that reject the Apostles’ Creed because of this supposedly contaminating word. Even those churches that use the creed (such as the nondenominational Bible church of which I am a member) raise a few eyebrows in doing so.

Instead of being frightened of this term, I suggest we try to understand what it actually describes. The word “catholic” comes from the Greek expression καθ’ ἅλλοφ, which literally means “pertaining to the whole” or “universal.” When it was used to describe the Christian church in the patristic period, it referred to the unified community of all true believers in the world: those whose loyalty was given to the risen Christ, whose doctrine was orthodox, and whose faith was identical to the eyewitness testimony proclaimed by the apostles.

Historically speaking, we must differentiate between “lowercase c” catholic Christianity and “capital C” Roman Catholic Christianity. When did Roman Catholicism come into being? The Roman Catholic Church is an ever-evolving communion, so it is obviously difficult to pinpoint its precise origins. There is no question that some of its roots date right back to the time of the apostles. That is to say, there are numerous doctrines and practices in the Roman Catholic Church that are found in the Bible itself and in first-century Christianity (not to mention the institutional continuity of the papacy with the earliest leadership of Rome). At the same time, the Roman Catholicism of

19. E.g., although the theology has changed from biblical times, the breaking of bread and drinking of wine in the modern Catholic Mass is a direct evolution of the table fellowship of the earliest Christians, for whom the elements offered spiritual nourishment drawn from the Savior’s body and blood. Likewise, recitation of the Lord’s Prayer is an ancient habit still practiced today. And there are many central doctrines held by the Roman Catholic Church that
today is not precisely the Roman Catholicism of the medieval or Reformation
periods. To identify its origins, we need to define what we’re talking about.

If we were to articulate some necessary elements of a Roman Catholic
Church, we would certainly need to include a developed doctrine that the
pope is the heir of St. Peter and bears an ongoing ministry in Peter’s name.
We might also include the idea that the church at Rome should be the pre-
eminent seat of Christianity in the whole Latin world. With these criteria in
mind, we can perhaps identify an approximate time of origin for the Roman
Catholic Church. As we will see in chapter 11 on Cyril of Alexandria, the
historical circumstances of the AD 400s created a change in the church at
Rome. Because of unprecedented turmoil and the weakening of the imper-
ial government, the bishops found themselves forced to take on increasing
civic responsibilities—a situation that continued to be the case in the me-
dieval papacy. The Latin West was politically severed from the Greek East
by the Germanic invasions. At this time, the bishop of Rome (or pope, as
he began to be called) became the sole leader of the Latin church, claiming
to be the living voice of Peter. These developments, coupled with the long-
standing prestige of Rome and the people’s habitual instinct to defer to the
capital city, made the Roman pontiff the natural spiritual authority for all
of Western Europe during the chaos of the early Middle Ages. Based on
these considerations, we can date the emergence of Roman Catholicism to
sometime around AD 500.

What about “lowercase c” catholic Christianity? We must recognize
that catholic Christianity predated the emergence of its later namesake.
It was established long before the Roman Catholic Church ever came into
being as such. To be catholic is simply to be part of the worldwide body
of Christ. Catholicity entails a sense of the universality of the Christian
church. This universality is not manifested in a watered-down ecumenism
that says nothing in particular and holds to no definite truths. Just the op-
posite: catholicity adheres to specific doctrinal content that is guarded and
protected by all who are truly catholic. This means it necessarily excludes
alternate versions of the faith—which is what the church fathers usually had
in mind when they referred to themselves as *katholikos*. We must therefore
perceive catholicity as a noble and worthy goal for every believer. Each of
us is called to join with all other Christians who “contend for the faith that
was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Such was the catholicism
of the early church fathers.

every orthodox Protestant would hold as well, such as the Trinity, the full deity and humanity
of Christ, the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection of the Lord, and the second coming.
Misconception #3: The church fathers represent the “fall” of Christianity.

It seems there is a certain historiography (or way of viewing history) subtly being transmitted among many evangelicals today. It goes something like this. The New Testament era was “good,” and for a century or two the church was “pure.” But then the subsequent generations started perverting the apostolic truth. By the Middle Ages, the perversion of the church—doctrinal, ritual, and moral—was complete. Only with the advent of the Protestant Reformers was apostolic Christianity finally recovered. Thus it becomes necessary to span the ancient and medieval periods with a kind of Protestant bridge. We must leapfrog over the intervening centuries to get back to the early church of the New Testament period, or maybe of the first two or three centuries of the Christian era. During the dark ages after the “fall” of the church, there was a faithful remnant who followed true Christianity in an underground community. Often this historiography employs the vivid image of a “trail of blood” that is said to have been left by the persecuted yet faithful Christians who lived in opposition to the evil institutional church. I know this historiography is being taught today because I have encountered it many times in my students.

What are the origins of this notion of Christianity’s “fall” and subsequent recovery? Most of the criticism has hinged on a particularly significant point in church history: the conversion of Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. The historical circumstances surrounding this event could hardly have been more dramatic. Because of a series of imperial decrees beginning in the year AD 303, the church was experiencing its most intense period of persecution. Many martyrs were being made amid unspeakable tortures. At this climactic moment, a new potential emperor began vying for power against his enemies. The ancient accounts tell us that the rising general Constantine had a dream in which Christ appeared to him and told him to fashion a Christian symbol into a magnificent banner inlaid with jewels and covered in gold. Sometime

20. See, e.g., J. M. Carroll, The Trail of Blood Following Christians Down through the Centuries, or The History of Baptist Churches from the Time of Christ, Their Founder, to the Present Day (Lexington: Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, 1931). A more contemporary example of this viewpoint, coming out of Brethren or Anabaptist life, is David Bercot’s book, The Kingdom That Turned the World Upside Down (Tyler, TX: Scroll, 2003). Bercot argues that Emperor Constantine introduced a “hybrid” church in which the teachings of Jesus were forgotten and worldly values were embraced. Augustine supported this corrupted viewpoint, and so did the mainline Reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli. Thus they did not preach the true gospel. Only the Anabaptists and some related movements understood the truth.

earlier, he had seen a vision of the cross in the sky across the midday sun, with a message that read “Conquer by this.”

Guided by these portentous omens, Constantine defeated his enemy and gained great power. He immediately granted toleration to the Christians and embarked on a program of imperial support for the faith. However, according to the historical interpretation assumed by many evangelicals, along with Christianity’s imperial acceptance came its corruption. Soon the masses clamored to join the religion of the emperor, which he is said to have embraced only for political reasons. The former dedication of the martyrs under persecution could no longer be found. The church was watered down by the uncommitted hordes who joined it in name only, without having true faith. Constantine’s conversion was therefore an unmitigated disaster. The church had fallen. Unfortunately, many Protestants today operate with more or less this perspective. It is found especially in the Free Church wing of the Reformation and in Baptist circles, as well as in many of today’s nondenominational Bible churches.

The “fall” historiography described above is not the viewpoint taken in this book, for several reasons. First of all, I find it to be an overly simplistic way of doing history. It is problematic to force the historical and demographic changes ushered in by Constantine into black-and-white categories of good and bad. History tends to be messy, not easily lending itself to portrayals that make absolute statements about positives and negatives. That is to say, Constantine could just as easily be viewed as a great plus for the church instead of a minus. If you were living in the time of Constantine, you probably would have viewed Christianity as “rising” not “falling” because now the authorities were no longer planning to chop off your head or cast you into the sea for being a Christian! My point is that we must always be careful in handing out white hats and black hats.

Another problem with the “fall” historiography is that it does not square with what many of the Protestant Reformers believed about the early church fathers. The Reformers often used the ancient church as an exemplar, the very thing to which they were trying to return. Of course, figures such as Martin Luther did view the Protestant movement as the “true church” whose suffering at the hands of the Roman Catholics finds parallels throughout church history. The Reformers understood pristine original Christianity to have been tarnished by centuries of papal abuse. So the idea of a “fall” in this sense was a natural part of Protestant argumentation in the sixteenth century, when the

balance of power weighed heavily in favor of the Roman Catholic Church. Such a perspective finds its most extreme expression in the Radical Reformation of the Anabaptists. Yet this does not mean all Protestants regarded the ancient church as the enemy. Rather, it was late medieval Roman Catholicism against which they directed their reforming efforts.

The Reformers generally considered the early church fathers (especially Augustine) to be their allies. Martin Luther warmly embraced the ancient Christians whenever their comments dovetailed with Scripture. Luther’s biblical commentaries are full of patristic citations. He tells us he had thoroughly studied the fathers, and he even endorsed the concept of basing a reform movement on their writings and the ancient creeds (though he thought this would be impossible to achieve in reality). Similarly, John Calvin considered himself and the other Reformers to be more faithful to the early church fathers than the Roman Catholic Church was. Against a Catholic opponent, Calvin wrote that “all we have attempted has been to renew that ancient form of the Church” that had been sullied by later generations. Calvin offered not just the church of the apostles but also that of the ancient fathers as a model against which the degradations of the Roman Catholic Church of his day stood in contrast. On many points of theology, “the ancient Church is clearly on our side, and opposes you.” Thus we see that most of the Reformers did not consider the patristic period to be the era of a “fall.” Rather, the ancient fathers were judged as having retained scriptural teaching in most respects.

But here is the most basic reason I differ from the “fall” historiography: it robs contemporary believers of vast portions of their historical legacy. It is my desire that every Christian be free to embrace his or her continuous heritage in the faith. This means all the centuries of Christian history are our rightful possession. At the same time, we must always recognize there are particular elements in each generation that we will not want to embrace, for they do

24. Martin Luther, “On the Councils and the Church,” trans. Eric W. Gritsch, in Luther’s Works 41, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 19–20. Luther goes on to borrow an image from St. Bernard in which studying the church fathers is compared to drinking from a clear brook: it is satisfying but not as satisfying as drinking from the actual fountainhead itself (the Scriptures). Luther’s approach to the church fathers was always selective. When he found them to be in harmony with Scripture, he accepted them. When he believed them to be contrary to Scripture, he felt the freedom to reject them on that point.
25. See Anthony N. S. Lane, John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).
not meet the scriptural standard of truth. Like the family tree we inevitably inherit, we must take the good along with the bad, the respected patriarchs as well as the black sheep. We should always keep a critical eye out, submitting every doctrine to the penetrating light of the Word of God. Armed with this sword, we need not fear to make all of church history our own. It is one of the richest aspects of our Christian inheritance. Even if we must separate the true currency from the counterfeit bills, we shouldn’t hesitate to take the good stuff to the bank!

So Why Study the Church Fathers?

What benefit can we expect to gain from studying our forefathers in the faith? I have devoted a lot of thought to how I should answer this question for my students. One common reason given for studying history is to “learn from the mistakes of the past.” But I do not think this viewpoint makes much sense. Most historical situations are different enough from our own to make direct comparisons impossible. Another reason to study the church fathers might be to use them as ammunition in a debate. I have already criticized this misuse of the fathers. While I do think it’s a superb idea to consult the historic view of the Christian church on a given theological topic, debates cannot be won simply by claiming, “I have more church father quotes on my side than you do!” If we are to derive a benefit from studying the ancients, it must lie somewhere other than their usefulness as moral lessons or as proof texts in modern argumentation.

I have found that the greatest benefit from getting to know the church fathers comes to us in this way: the fathers help us to get in touch with the general thrust of the Christian faith. By “thrust of the Christian faith” I mean two things. First, there is the doctrinal thrust. The ancients give us insight into what historic, orthodox Christianity is all about. Their understanding of the overall message of Scripture provides us with exegetical guideposts outside of which we dare not venture. They also have bequeathed to us some of the terminology we must use to do theology (such as the word “Trinity,” for example). Of course, on some interpretive details we will differ substantially from the fathers. But when it comes to the general thrust of Christian doctrine, we must stand alongside them if we want to be considered orthodox. They point us to a “mere Christianity” that defines the very essence of the

Christian faith. In other words, the church fathers have collectively blazed a theological trail for us. It is of vital importance that every Christian believer be found traveling along the same path of historic orthodoxy that the ancient believers first labored to create.

Second, there is a communal thrust of the Christian faith. As I said above, Christianity cannot simply be reduced to a set of doctrines. Our faith is vitally concerned with real people and with events that transpired on the world’s stage as part of God’s drama of salvation. When we get to know the church fathers as individuals, we will begin to understand something of the grandeur of the community to which we belong—what the Apostles’ Creed calls the “communion of saints.” We begin to feel connected to those believers who passionately followed Jesus Christ in their own eras, just as we do today. We become aware that there is a thrust or a movement of the church over time. Our study of the Christian past should therefore energize us to ministry and exhort us to faithfulness. It should give us a sense that we are not alone, that we are part of something grand and magnificent, that we must fight the good fight in our own generation like those who went before us.

I find Hebrews 12:1–2 to provide a relevant parallel here. Just as the steadfast witness of the Old Testament heroes described in Hebrews 11 could encourage the first-century Christians to stand firm, so we today can add the church fathers to the words, “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to go down in history as part of a sloppy, decadent generation of Christians. I want to live up to the example of those who have gone before, so that together we might look upon Jesus, “the founder and perfecter of our faith.” As you read this book, I sincerely pray that the lives of the ancient Christians will encourage you to finish the race they’ve already run so well.

Provocative Questions

1. Have you ever experienced a profound sense of your own family heritage? What were some of the feelings generated in that moment? Do you think it is possible to have those same feelings toward your “spiritual ancestors”? Why or why not?
2. Do you have any problems with thinking of the ancient Christians as your spiritual forefathers? What does the word “father” mean to you? How does that affect your view of the first generations of believers?

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3. Read Deuteronomy 32:7. Does Moses’s instruction for the Israelites to reflect on their historical beginnings apply to modern-day Christians as well? Are we instructed by Scripture to look to the foundational figures of our Christian faith?

4. Read Hebrews 12:1–2. Who exactly makes up the “cloud of witnesses” (see chapter 11)? Why are they mentioned in the original setting of this epistle? In other words, what are they supposed to do for the Christian? How would the biblical principle given here function in the church today?

5. What would it look like to profess Christianity but to be outside the general “thrust” of the orthodox Christian faith? Do you know anyone like this? Are you outside the historic thrust of the faith in any way?

Good Books to Dig Deeper


Key Reference Sources


Introduction

