

Learning from the Church Fathers (1)

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A Journey of Discovery

For many today, history seems of little value. Even the twenty-first century church in the Western world has little sense of continuity with the past. There is also a strong bias against the history preceding the Reformation. All too often, theological issues and worship practices are debated as if the debate began yesterday. Many wonder whether the church has a reason for its existence. And if so, what is it? Seeker churches, purpose-driven churches, worship centres, and so on, are discussed in an extraordinary proliferation of books. Many give the impression that the past has little to contribute. Therefore, the urge is to "start over again." The argument is that all the church needs is a fresh view of the Bible, and a grasp of the current culture. But due to this attitude toward history, the church has been unknowingly shaped by social, political, and philosophical forces. In *Ancient Future Faith*, Robert E. Webber observed that "many independent church movements, small denominations and fellowships, and parachurch movements are about reinventing the wheel." And evangelicals are still inclined to invite converts to "attend the church of your choice", often without a sufficient definition of what it means to be part of the church. But this type of "freelance" Christianity is a dangerous misunderstanding of what it means to belong to the body of Christ.

North American Liberalism

The rise of the theological liberalism in North America contributed to the spiritual malaise of our time. In the nineteenth-century some theologians decided that theological expressions needed to change in accord with the spirit of the age. They were confident that they could retain the "substance" of the gospel while freeing it from "past forms which were never of its essence." In 1882, the Congregationalist, Newman Smyth in New Haven, summarized their guiding principle: "Every doctrine," he wrote, "is to be thought out afresh and taught in methods better suited to the temper of the times." In 1916, Arthur Cushman McGiffert, a Presbyterian professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, emphasized the "growing control of theology by the concept of evolution." The Bible has no "infallible authority." "Experience" provides "the only legitimate basis of theology." Sadly, liberalism remains entangled in a long-term addiction to the ideological and theological fads. For example, feminist theologians ask whether a Jewish male can save women? Black theologians wonder whether a Jewish male can save black people? Those theologians take their starting-point, not from Scripture, but from the human experience of oppression. Considering all these different ideas, I believe evangelical theologian, Alister E. McGrath, is right on when he calls modern trends in theology little more than knee jerk reactions to short-term cultural trends.

The Return to the Church Fathers

In the light of modern cultural trends, I suggest we should read and study the history of the Church. Why? It makes us alert to both the mistakes of the past, and the alarming way in which they are repeated in the present. It is a call to return to the fundamentals of the Christian faith. And it is impossible to do theology as if it had never been done before. There is always an element of looking over one's shoulder, to see how things were done in the past,

and what answers were given. The fact is that God's church existed for centuries. Therefore, the formative period of the early church especially is a rich resource for theological thought. The early church was an eyewitness to the great things God has done. Therefore, *people and events* mattered more than abstract ideas.

Most of the main issues the early Christians faced have remained virtually permanent questions in Christian history. In a series of articles, I intend to introduce our Christian Renewal readers to some of our church fathers, our spiritual ancestors, in a more personal way. They are a previous generation of believers who continue to guide their spiritual descendants in the church today. They lived through a most turbulent and exciting period in history, and some of the things they said are worthy to hear again today. The age of the church fathers was a time of establishing the basic doctrines of the Church, a time of intellectual and spiritual discovery. If you are not well acquainted with their lives and thought, you are missing something valuable.

The church fathers provide us with the first links of continuity with our Christian past. They passed on the core tenets of the Christian faith to later generations, which they themselves had received from the apostles. The second-century 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." But we cannot really understand what the church fathers said if we do not know the context in which they said it. Their lives are often as colourful and as inspiring as their writings.

Until about A.D. 125, the early church fathers – such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and others – were more concerned with establishing the faith and discipline of the Christian community than with an attempt to demonstrate the credibility of the Christian faith. After the first quarter of the second century, however, the defence of the faith became the most characteristic form of Christian writing. Important theologians who focussed on that period were such men as Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius.

An encouraging development in theology is the upsurge of interest in the study of the church fathers. This late twentieth century revitalization of interest is not confined to Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox writers, but it is also being strongly influenced by evangelical Protestant voices such as those of Robert Webber and Thomas Oden. The idea that evangelicals ought to draw from early Christian thought is by no means a new one. It began with the Reformers of the sixteenth century. Both Luther and Calvin drew heavily from the early church fathers. In 1978, evangelical scholar Robert Webber wrote in *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity*, that the era of the early church (A.D. 100-500), and particularly the second century, contains insights which evangelicals need to recover. Methodist theologian, Thomas Oden, began his transformation from a theological liberal to a leading spokesman for evangelicals' return to tradition. In his own spiritual journey, he turned to the church fathers in an effort to render a faithful and meaningful interpretation of the Christian faith. And he comments about the many who show renewed interest in the church fathers, "The sons and daughters of modernity are rediscovering the neglected beauty of classical Christian teaching. It is a moment of joy, beholding anew what had been nearly forgotten, of hugging a lost child."

Why is it so relevant to study the church fathers once again? What is at stake? It is Christology (the doctrine of Christ). The questions about Christ are not abstract discussions about His person only, but a very real discussion about the nature and efficacy of our salvation. "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." This is the remarkable confession made by Peter in response to the question of Jesus to His disciples: "who do you say that I am?" This same question has been before the Church throughout its history and continues to confront it today. The Church's life depends upon giving a faithful answer to this question. Without Christ, it is impossible to talk about God. Regardless as to whether or not it is palatable in our pluralistic society, we must continue to proclaim that "there is no other name given to men by which we must be saved" besides the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). Jesus Christ is the unique Saviour. There is none other who can lead us to God the Father. This confession that the truth is one ('Christ is *the* truth') is crucial for Christian life and theology as well as the claim that Christian beliefs are true ('Christ is the *truth*'). Whenever and wherever the Church is in decline, its cause can usually be traced back to the fact that it gives the wrong answer to Jesus' question "who do you say that I am?" The fact is that the uniqueness of the Christ, the Son of the Living God is not always everywhere acknowledged today in the Christian Church.

Conclusion

Reformed theology has always made a very clear distinction between Scripture and tradition. Scripture has authority, and tradition has the value of witnessing to that authority. If we accept the church fathers as an important element of our tradition, then we need to be interested in them as they point us to Scripture. Novel ideas about church and theology will come and go, but classical Christianity will endure. Current innovations have no connection with the past. But the resurrected old treasures from the church fathers still have deep meaning and offer direction for the future. The Holy Spirit was active in the early church. He is also active today. Jesus promised the Church His abiding presence. He said, "Surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt.28: 20).

(To be continued)