

Learning from the Church Fathers (2)

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Remember our Roots!

If the Bible has ultimate authority in faith and practice, who has the right to interpret the Bible? This was the fundamental question the sixteenth-century Reformation period faced. The answer to that question divided the Reformers and continues to divide the church today. The Reformers turned to the past for answers. Today liberal Protestants want to sweep the past aside and start all over again. There is even gathering momentum for a "new Reformation." Since the "old Reformation" was based on the Bible, they believe the "new Reformation" needs something more radical. The infamous John Shelby Spong, the Episcopal bishop of Newark, seeks to persuade the Church that the "new Reformation" should abandon such "obsolete" beliefs as the resurrection of Jesus and a reliable revelation of God in the Bible.

Tradition

But instead of a "new Reformation," Spong and his sympathizers do not only bite the hands that feed them, they also forget that their questions have been discussed long ago. They also break fellowship with Christians who have gone before them. They have no tradition to pass on to the next generation. Tradition cannot be discovered or rediscovered, but it must be received from someone else. It can be received or rejected, but it cannot be invented. As Tertullian (ca. AD 197) put it, "In the Lord's apostles, we possess our authority. For even they did not of themselves choose to introduce something new, but faithfully delivered the teachings they had received from Christ." Why emphasize tradition in our fast-moving, past-forgetting age? Tradition contains materials of lasting value and spiritual enrichment. We reach out for tradition because we want to see who we are, where we came from, and where we are going. We need to keep in contact with our roots. God made us live in community. Whenever Christians talk about tradition, the church fathers figure prominently in the discussion. When we get to know the church fathers, we become aware of the communion of saints to which we belong. We realize then we are not alone. We are not the first ones in history who face crucial issues. We are part of something grand and magnificent. This encourages us to fight the good fight of faith in our own generation like those who went before us. As the first generation of Christians stood firm for truth and righteousness, so we need the exhortation today, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Heb. 12:1).

Why study the church fathers?

The church fathers had to face the question: "Who is Jesus Christ?" This was not an abstract question. Either Jesus was God and still is, or he is not God and never has been. The church fathers answered questions that our generation is asking once again. Therefore, the study of the church fathers is so relevant. They blazed the trail for us. When we study them, we gain insight into what historic, orthodox Christianity is all about. We learn about their roles in the development of the canon of Scripture. They preserved and even expounded on the biblical truth they sought to defend. In spite of our contemporary questions, they remain models of

theological thought. They offer foundational thought on the church, ministry, worship, and the sacraments. They also bequeathed to us some of the terminology we must use in theology – such as the word "Trinity." They, as well as other early church leaders, were responsible for summarizing the general doctrines of the faith in creedal form, such as the *Apostles' Creed*. To this day the Church frequently confesses its faith by reciting the *Apostles' Creed* or the *Nicene Creed*. In other words, if we neglect to learn from the insights gained by the church fathers, we deprive ourselves of a wealth of spiritual and theological insights. As Robert E. Webber points out: "The work of the early church fathers represents foundational Christian thought, which has been the subject of interpretation, reinterpretation, and debate throughout the history of the Christian church. The importance of the Fathers is crucial to every age of the faith. Therefore, no Christian dares wrestle with postmodern thought until he or she has studied classical Christian thought."

Common Misconceptions about the Church Fathers

If the study of the church fathers is so necessary for the building of a healthy church, why do many evangelicals and even Reformed Christians neglect them? In his *Getting to Know the Church Fathers. An Evangelical Introduction*, Bryan M. Litfin points to some common misconceptions some have about the church fathers.

1. The church fathers were not biblical

Litfin notes that the teachings of the church fathers and creeds are sometimes referred to as "the doctrines of men" (human tradition) as opposed to the divine revelation given in Scripture. And he correctly states that the early church fathers could not have conceived of "tradition" (that which is handed down) as being contradictory to the Bible. The apostles preached the gospel to the world verbally, and wrote about the Christian faith in the inspired Scripture. The entire apostolic deposit of faith is exactly what the early fathers intended to embrace in their church. So "tradition" is not a term opposed to Scripture. 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. The famous 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. Let no man add to these, neither let him take [anything away] from these."

2. The church fathers were Roman Catholic

Litfin notes that some fundamentalist churches reject the Apostles' Creed because of the word "catholic." He observes that we must recognize that Catholic Christianity predated the emergence of its later name sake. It was established long before the Roman Catholic Church ever came into being. To be catholic is simply to be part of the worldwide body of Christ. To be a catholic is to join all who "contend for the faith that was once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Such was the Catholicism of the early church fathers.

3. The church fathers represent the "fall" of Christianity

Litfin notes that most of the criticism for the so-called "fall" of Christianity has focussed on the conversion of Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. Many believe it was an unmitigated disaster. As the Church was "favoured" by Constantine, it was watered down by the

uncommitted hordes who joined in name only, without having true faith. Sadly, many Protestants today operate more or less from this perspective.

The Church Fathers and the Reformers

The Reformation was not a novelty, but a return to the early church. Any fair reading of the reformers will bear this out. They often used the church fathers as exemplars, and as resources for the development of their theology. It was late medieval Roman Catholicism against which they directed their reforming efforts. They generally considered the church fathers (especially Augustine) to be their allies. The impact on the Church by the church fathers and the reformers is seen in the fact that they understood Scripture so well. As the church fathers and the reformers point us to the Scripture so powerfully and open up Scripture so widely, we should listen to them. In his *Worship: Reformed according to Scripture*, Hugh Oliphant Old notes, "The thinking of the Fathers inspires others to think. The Fathers were the seminal thinkers of Christian theology. If it were not for this ability of theirs to speak to the most devout and fertile minds of every age and nation, they would have been forgotten long ago."

a. Martin Luther

Marin Luther cannot be explained away by the economics or politics of his day, as some have tried to do. He gained fresh and clear insights into some lasting realities. He warmly embraced the church fathers whenever their comments dovetailed with Scripture. He tells us he had thoroughly studied their writings, and even endorsed the ideal of a reformation based on their writings and the ancient creeds (though he thought this would be impossible to achieve). Therefore, renewal, not innovation, was his watchword. His primary source of Christian theology was the Bible. But he wanted his readers to understand that the foundation of his thought was the Bible, as read through the eyes of the great religious thinkers of the past, above all Augustine of Hippo, the "doctor of grace." Luther's biblical commentaries are full of citations from the writings of the church fathers. He perceived the transcendent authority of the Word of God. But his denial of the Church of Rome as the sole interpreter of Scripture became his lasting legacy. On the basis of the priesthood of all believers he insisted that every Christian has the right to interpret the Bible and to raise concerns about any aspect of the church's teaching or practice that appears to be inconsistent with the Bible. According to Luther, therefore, the right to interpret the Bible is the birthright of all Christians.

b. John Calvin

John Calvin considered himself and the other reformers to be more faithful to the early church fathers than the Church of Rome. In John Calvin we recognize an outstanding interpreter of Scripture. His biblical commentaries still speak to us today. In the *Institutes* he treated the whole range of Christian thought.

John Calvin had an in-depth knowledge of the church fathers. He could quote them from memory. In a debate regarding the credibility of the Reformation, he quoted the third-century Cyprian of Carthage to the letter, and the fourth-century preacher John Chrysostom even more precisely. By the time Calvin sat down, everyone clearly understood that the Genevan Reformation was about renewal and continuity of the church.

To be continued.