

Early Church Fathers

This is lesson seven, “Witnesses unto the Truth: the Early Church Fathers.” We have been talking for some time about the early church fathers. Today I want to focus on those early church fathers and try to, in a sense, introduce them to you. It is hard for us sometimes to keep these church fathers straight. There are so many of them and they tend to blend together. At least for Protestants, they are not so distinctive in our minds as Luther, Calvin, Knox, Zwingli, and the other Reformers. We can keep them straight because we know them and we study them. But the early church fathers, for most of us, are more difficult to remember. I would like to talk about those church fathers in this lecture and see if we can get to know them somewhat better. One of the most important of the church fathers was Origen, from Alexandria in Egypt. I will use a prayer from Origen as we begin this class. Origen wrote a little book on prayer, one of the devotional gems of the early church. It was a kind of handbook for Christians to help them know how to pray. This is certainly an important topic for Christians in all ages, back in the early church as well as for us today. As we begin this class we will pray using the words of the church father, Origen. Let us pray.

“Lord God, let us keep your Scriptures in mind and meditate on them day and night, persevering in prayer, always on the watch. We beg you, Lord, give us real knowledge of what we read, and show us not only how to understand it but how to put it into practice that we might obtain spiritual grace, enlightened by the law of the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord, whose power and glory will endure throughout all ages. Amen.”

The church fathers, by anyone’s account, are a formidable group. They are distant in time, way back at the very beginnings of the history of the church. Their writings by which we know them are often different and distant, both in the way they say things and in the manner of thought that comes through from these early church fathers. We tend to lump them together as a phalanx of austere gentlemen with beards and books. The impression of the church fathers as formidable only increases when we cast our eyes on the amount of books they wrote. One collection consists of more than 400 volumes of writings from the early church fathers, more than 100,000 pages in Latin and Greek. In those books the writings of most of the fathers are kept quite safe, under lock and key. This is because not many people are able or willing to read and understand all of that. There is a much smaller collection that is yet still daunting. This collection is of the writings of the anti-Nicene fathers, the Nicene fathers, and the post-Nicene fathers. This collection consists of 38 rather large volumes, which form only a small selection of the writings of the church fathers before, during, and after the Council of Nicea. I was in a class once at Princeton Seminary when Professor George Henry challenged us to go stand in the library in front of all these books. The library at Princeton owned copies of both of these collections, and it formed quite a wall of books. The professor challenged us to go stand before all those books and be humbled. That was not a very hard assignment, but to try to read some of those books was something else altogether.

The church fathers, of course, are famous. We talk about them all the time. They are admired. They are quoted or alluded to often. But like some famous people they are not very well known. They are famous, but not well known. I think there are some reasons for that. One thing is that the writings of the church fathers are certainly difficult to read, even if you have a copy of them that has been translated into your language. This is in part because the church fathers tend to be, dare I say it, long winded. They often take about five pages to say what we would prefer to say in one page or less. That was simply the way people wrote in those days, so you have to be patient and listen for a long time, though you may be thinking that the point has long since been made, but Clement, Irenaeus, or Tertullian go on and on about it. The church fathers are difficult to read not only because they are long winded but also because

they tend to go into all kinds of digressions. They really do not stick to the point. Gregory the Great, toward the end of the period of the church fathers, said, "This is how a preacher should preach. A preacher of the sacred Word should imitate the manner of a river. For if a river as it flows through its channels comes upon valleys upon its banks it immediately flows with full force into them, and when it has filled them up it at once returns to its course. This is exactly the way the preacher of the divine Word should be so that when he is discussing something, if perhaps he finds an occasion near at hand to be edifying, he should, as it were, force the streams of his tongue to the neighboring valley, and when he has filled up the plain with his instruction he may return to the course of his main topic."

Now, you will not be taught that manner of preaching at Covenant Seminary or any place else as far as I know. Homileticians tell us to have a point and stick to it. But the church fathers did not like to do that. One topic will raise another topic and they will follow all those ideas. If you want to see this in great detail you can read *The City of God* by Saint Augustine, his great writing. Someone has said that it is a book about everything, which is nearly true. It is wonderful material, but it goes into every direction, and you are never quite sure why or where the book is headed. Thus the church fathers followed these trails in their writings and may or may not get back to the main point because one idea leads to another. That makes it rather difficult for us to read their works.

Another problem with reading the writings of the church fathers is that they loved imagery and symbolism. Some of this is wonderful and helpful. Sometimes it enhances the topic, if used sparingly. But often it overwhelms the topic. There is a famous image used by Ignatius of Antioch, who seeks to describe the Christian life in terms of constructing a building. Thus the image he has in mind is that the Christian life is like building a building. He says this: "You are like stones of the Father's temple, having been made ready for the building, God the Father, carried out to the heights by the engine of Jesus Christ which is the cross, using the Holy Spirit as a rope. Faith is your windlass and love is the road leading up to God." By the time you reach the end of that paragraph you realize the image has taken over and the point Ignatius is making is lost in the profusion of ideas that he piles, one upon the other.

All of that is to say that we do not have an easy task when we try to discern and understand and use what the early church fathers were saying. But this is a task we should endeavor to take on because there is great value and significance in reading the early church fathers. Before I get into that, let me next try to tell you who the church fathers were. That is not easy because we do not have a precise list of the church fathers. We usually think of the church fathers as the leaders of the church after the time of the apostles. We go back to the first century and view the period of the church fathers as beginning when the last of the apostles died. The last apostle, as far as we know, was John, who lived almost through the entire first century. Some of the early church fathers would have overlapped with John. The church fathers were the leaders of the church, possibly beginning with Clement of Rome. Clement lived in Rome as pastor of the church there. He was not a bishop then, and certainly not a pope, but he was a pastor in the church of Rome in the late first century. He wrote a letter to the church at Corinth, like Paul wrote two and maybe three letters to the church at Corinth. We have Clement's letter; it is called First Clement. He wrote that in about the year 96 AD as a pastor in Rome sending a pastoral letter to a sister church to answer some questions that had come to him, to try to edify and help that church. We could say that the church fathers began in the period after the apostles. One standard way to divide these church fathers is to call the earliest ones the anti-Nicene fathers. This means that they were before the Council of Nicea. The council took place in the year 325 AD, and there were many church fathers who lived before the third century. The next group is titled the Nicene fathers, people like Athanasius and others who lived during the time of the Nicene Council. And then there are the post-Nicene fathers, those who lived after the Council of Nicea. When did the period of the church fathers end? It started just after the time of the apostles, but

how long does it extend? Here it becomes rather artificial. Some people think of the last of the church fathers as Saint Augustine, in the fifth century. Others, in the Western church especially, view the period of the church fathers as extending further so that people like Isidor of Seville in Spain, or the Venerable Bede in Britain are sometimes included in the list of church fathers. In some people's minds this period extends all the way to the 12th century when Bernard of Clairvaux lived, who is often spoken of as the last of the church fathers. There is a kind of openness in terms of the end of this period.

In the Eastern church it is often said that John of Damascus, who lived in the eighth century, was the church father who ended the period of the church fathers. But an argument could be made that in the Eastern Orthodox Church the period of the fathers never ended. When I was a student at Princeton I would see Father Florovski. He was an Eastern Orthodox theologian of fame and preeminence in the Eastern church who taught at Princeton for a while. I would see him walking around campus with a long cassock on and a long beard. He had a sort of other-worldly look on his face. But a cigarette always seemed to be rather carelessly held, with sparks flying. I was always a little afraid that the cassock or the beard would catch on fire and Father Florovski would disappear from sight. But he was there. Nobody really talked to him, but we looked at him and wondered about this apparition on a Presbyterian campus. I did hear once, in an ecumenical gathering—people from different church traditions—someone said the period of the church fathers was over and irrelevant to the modern age. Father Florovski stood up and said, “The period of the church fathers is not over. I am still alive.” In the Eastern church there is a sense that great figures appear and the history of the church fathers continues.

As we try to think about these people, one thing we ought to recognize right away is that the early church fathers were not Europeans in the modern sense of the word. The church fathers came from what we would call the Hellenized part of the Mediterranean. That is, the Mediterranean world with Greek culture, in the north, south, and west, but particularly in the east surrounding the Sea of Galilee. They came from North Africa, Rome, many came from Asia Minor, and from lands further east, outside the bounds of the Roman Empire. Most of them spoke Greek because Greek was a universal language in the Roman world and even beyond during that time. Later some of the church fathers spoke Latin only. In addition to Greek the early church fathers represented diverse native tongues and different ethnic identities. Not only were these men “early” church fathers, meaning they came early in the history of the church, but they are called “fathers.” I think Christian people have called the church fathers “fathers” because the church tended to look up to these men as examples, leaders, and teachers. Were they godly and righteous people? Well, yes. But they were like us, with flaws, blemishes, shortcomings, and failings. Tertullian, for instance, had a very hard, fanatical streak about him. The church father Jerome who translated the Bible into Latin (we call this translation the Vulgate) had an unpleasant and unforgiving temperament. I never read Jerome much without thinking, “I really just do not like this man.” Cyril of Alexander persecuted his theological opponents relentlessly and was often unscrupulous in controversy.

So we see that the church fathers were far from perfect. It is not that they were super saints or super righteous that makes them the church fathers. They were far from perfect, but they were characterized by a kind of holy zeal for the Gospel, for the truth. And also, I think, they had an understanding that their task was as much to live the Gospel as it was to explain and defend it. They tried to defend the Gospel, to explain it, to preach it, and to exemplify it as good pastors and church leaders should. Tertullian, for all his irascibility and hardness, wrote a wonderful little book called *On Patience*. He said, “I wrote this book because I do not have patience. I do not know anything about it. But I need it; it is a Christian quality. And so, rather than writing a book about something I think I am good at, I will write a book about something I am not good at.” As a result of that, Tertullian's *On Patience* is a very helpful book, written by a man who was not patient.

Gregory of Nazianzus spoke for all the fathers when he said, “Those who dare to speak about God must have made great progress in contemplation [mediation, study] of the things of the Lord and must have made great progress in purification [sanctification].” The church fathers realized it was not enough to speak words about God. One’s life must be committed to the task of living for God, as much as one’s mind and mouth must be involved in thinking and speaking about God. The church fathers were, of course, orthodox Christian leaders. We have seen how as the heresies attacked the church the church fathers wrote treatises, books against the heresies. But as you read the early church fathers, the anti-Nicene church fathers (those who came before the Council of Nicea), you will discover that some of the church fathers were themselves guilty of what we would call heresy. They did not fully understand the doctrine of the Trinity. A number of the early church fathers had the view that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are somehow subordinate to the Father. Therefore as we read the church fathers everything we read will not be perfectly right. There are mistakes of various kinds in the writings of the church fathers. Despite failures, in charity and in orthodoxy the church has come to honor its early leaders. One of the ways you can tell this is that most of the church fathers are called saints: Saint Clement, Saint Ignatius, and so on. Two of the church fathers, really the two whom I would call the most brilliant minds among the church fathers, are never called saints. We never speak of Saint Tertullian or Saint Origen. That is because there were certain problems in both of those church fathers. There were theological problems in the case of Origen. There were personality problems and the issue of him moving into the Montanist heresy for a period in the case of Tertullian.

That is a brief overview—some comments on how to think of these church fathers. Let me next introduce to you very briefly nine of the most famous of the church fathers and say just a word about each. First, meet Clement of Rome. He was a pastor. He lived in Rome at the end of the first century. Like any pastor in any century he was busy and concerned with the affairs of his flock. But he was able to take time to look at the larger church. He viewed his responsibility not only to the church in Rome but also to the church in Corinth. He realized that his responsibility as a minister of the church of Jesus Christ went beyond his own local congregation in Rome. He was a wonderful man who is a delight to read because you see a real pastor’s heart coming out in Clement of Rome.

Then meet Polycarp. Polycarp was bishop, or pastor, in a town in Asia called Smyrna. We are always intrigued with Polycarp because he knew John the apostle. Thus when we read the writings of Polycarp we are reading the writings of someone who had spoken to and knew one of the apostles of Jesus Christ. He was a disciple of a disciple of Jesus Christ. Polycarp was martyred in the year 155 AD with the words on his lips, “Eighty-six years I have served Him and He did me no wrong. How can you ask me to deny Christ my king?”

Another martyr among the early church fathers was Justin. We can remember that this man was a martyr because we call him Justin the Martyr. He knocked at practically every door of ancient wisdom before he became a Christian. He was a noble apologist who defended Christianity against both Judaism and paganism. He had a school in Rome where he taught people.

One of Justin’s students was a man who had come from a long way off, from Assyria, to study in Rome. His name was Tatian. He was Asia’s first theologian. Tatian was, in some ways, a very radical thinker and Christian. He was very much into extreme asceticism, which we will look at later as we come to the Monastic period in church history. He was also a great scholar whose writings—not in Greek but in Syriac—prepared the way for the Gospel to be taken beyond the Greek speaking areas of western Asia and further east. Tatian’s *Diatessaron* is particularly famous. This was the first harmony of the Gospels.

Then we need to meet Irenaeus. Irenaeus was born in Smyrna in Asia. Asia, what would be called Asia Minor or Turkey, was more or less the Bible belt (location of high concentration of Christian centers) of that time. Thus many of the church fathers came from Asia, and many of the church councils (as we will see later) took place in Asia. Smyrna was the home of Irenaeus, where he often heard Polycarp preach—another link to an earlier period. A wonderful thing about this man was that he was sent as a missionary from Asia all the way to Gaul, Southern France, the area around Lyon in what we now call France. In those days this was pagan, unchristian territory. Therefore Irenaeus went as a missionary. He learned to speak the Gaulic language so as to be able to communicate with those who did not speak Greek as he did. Irenaeus led the church through a time of furious persecution and defended Christianity from his distant missionary outpost. In this way he was something like Jonathan Edwards at Stockbridge writing great books of theology as he served the Indians. Irenaeus was in Lyon preaching the Gospel to the pagans of Gaul and building the church but keeping his eye on Gnosticism and other heresies that were afflicting the church elsewhere, writing his famous multi-volume work called *Against Heresies*.

Then meet Tertullian. Tertullian was a lawyer who became a theologian. Some people think it was a good thing he was a lawyer, others think it was a bad thing. He did bring into Christianity a kind of legal mind. He was clear and precise in the way he defined his terms and in the way he wrote about Christianity. He was the first important Christian writer in Latin. With Tertullian we have the beginning of the Latin tradition in Christian theology. One fifth century writer said this about Tertullian, “Almost every word he uttered was an epigram and every sentence was a victory.” That is high praise, but there is a lot to that. Of all the church fathers I have mentioned, Tertullian may be the most exciting to read because he has a way of saying things such as, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church,” or “The pagans say of the Christians, ‘How they love each other! How they are willing even to die for one another!’” We quote Tertullian all the time even if we do not always remember that it is coming from him. Tertullian, according to one analysis, was responsible for coining in Latin 509 new nouns, 284 new adjectives, and 161 new verbs. The language just was not big enough for him, and he kept expanding it. Alister McGrath writes that, happily, not all of these new words seem to have caught on. But one that happily did was “trinity.” That was a new word that Tertullian coined because some word was needed to express that idea and he came up with the word “trinity.” We will see how important that word is when we study the Council of Nicea.

Next let us meet Clement of Alexandria. He was part of a famous school in Alexandria, perhaps something like a theological seminary or a church school or an upper-level Sunday school class. One of the teachers in that school was Pantaenus. Pantaenus was from the island of Sicily, and Clement called his teacher “the Sicilian bee” because he was so busy studying and writing, like a bee going from flower to flower always on the move. Pantaenus did continue to stay on the move because as we saw earlier he went all the way to India, we think, as a missionary to encourage and teach the Christians who may have been evangelized as early as the time of the apostle Thomas. Clement was a student of Pantaenus. He was a gentle man. Perhaps of all the church fathers Clement was the one we could feel the most at ease with, one whom we could feel was a real friend and father. He wrote the hymn “Shepherd of Tender Youth” that I used as the opening prayer in an earlier lesson. Clement was a man of very broad learning. He very much wanted to capture the best of the learning that was available in the Hellenized world for the Christian church.

Then let us meet Clement’s successor in the school at Alexandria, the brilliant Origen. Origen is the patron saint of Christian theological scholarship, according to one scholar. Origen began his writing about the year 215 AD. It is interesting that Christian History Magazine in its list of the 100 most important dates in Christian history includes 215 AD, the year in which Origen started to write. And he wrote for the rest of his life. He wrote books on apologetics. We have thought about his *Contra Celsum*,

(Against Celsus). He wrote books on biblical exposition, commentaries. He did an excellent textual work on the Old Testament called the *Hexapla*. And he wrote what we could consider the first systematic theology, which is called *On First Principles*. Origen was a kind of pioneer. He wrote systematic theology before the church councils, before Saint Augustine, before John Calvin, and before all that comes after him. Thus he was a kind of pioneer, like one who builds a road to an untamed territory. Sometimes he used rubble to fill in the gaps, and the road gave way. But the marvel of it all is that the road was built at all. Ever since Origen's time people have had mixed feelings about him. Someone has said that he was like the poem about the little girl who had a little curl right in the middle of her forehead. When he was good, he was very, very good; but when he was bad he was horrid. You can get some very bad doctrines, ideas, and teachings from Origen. One of the worst is his teaching on universalism. Using just one part of a verse in Acts 3:21, which says, "...The time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets," Origen teaches or at least speculates that eventually God's love and patience will prevail so that everything will be restored and everyone will be saved, including the devil. Then he introduces another bad idea and says that because God preserves free will the devil could fall again and the whole thing could start again. Fortunately the church has not followed Origen in that particular way of understanding eschatology.

Let us meet just one other early church father. Later we will meet many others. We will study Augustine, Chrysostom, and Gregory the Great. But we will end this survey with Cyprian. Another African like Tertullian, Cyprian was from Carthage. He tried to teach people what the church, what the true church, is. He presided over part of the church, the church in North Africa during one of the great controversies in early church history—the Donatist controversy that we will study later.

Those are a few, nine among scores of church fathers. But let me end by thinking with you for a moment, trying to answer this question: how should we view the church fathers? Roman Catholics and particularly Greek and Orthodox people venerate and elevate the church fathers. Particularly in the Eastern church, the church fathers are viewed as being close to if not equal with Scripture. That is not the correct way to view the church fathers. Protestants, except for the Church of England, have tended to ignore the church fathers. We lump them all together and pay a certain amount of respect to them and then move on to something else. Sometimes Protestants can think that not much good came out of the early church and the medieval church, except for Saint Augustine, who is the one person we tend to like. We sometimes think nothing really good came from the church until the Reformation. But as you read Calvin you see Calvin quoting the church fathers. He understood the church fathers, he respected the church fathers. He respected what he calls "the consensus of the first five centuries," before the church became, you might say, the Roman Catholic Church. So we should as Protestants try harder to know the church fathers, to read the church fathers, and to use them.

We are greatly helped in that task by a new set of books, Bible commentaries that have just started to appear. These are called *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. There are 27 volumes projected to be published in that series by InterVarsity Press. This series will take Bible books like Mark and Romans (those two have already been published) and scholars will study through these many volumes of the writings of the church fathers to tell us what the church fathers said about the Gospel of Mark, how they commented on Mark. Then as you preach and teach Mark you can turn to that volume and see what Clement and Tertullian and Origen and Ignatius and Irenaeus said about a certain text. That will be a wonderful resource. We should use it if we are able to access it because it will get us into the understanding of the Bible from the earliest commentators on Scripture. The editor of this entire series is Thomas Oden from Drew University and Seminary. I was reading just last night an interview with Thomas Oden. The question was asked of him, "How did a study of the early church fathers cause you to become an evangelical Christian?" This man was in a liberal tradition, as he explains in his answer to

this question, but he became an evangelical. That is important news to many people, that Thomas Oden is now saying something very different about Christianity than he had been for many years. His answer was this:

[My study of the early church fathers] literally reshaped me spiritually and theologically. Until the early 1970s I was a modern liberal theologian, adapting Christian teaching to modern assumptions. But by that time I began to realize that those assumptions were collapsing and that classical Scripture and tradition were much more stable and wise. Until then I had been a Marxist politically, a Freudian psychologically, and a relativist in situation ethics and moral judgments. I started to read the ancient Christian writers, especially the Patristic teachers such as Athanasius and Jerome. I had had a good education but no one ever told me about the importance of these people. Once I began to realize the wisdom in that tradition I knew that the Holy Spirit was powerfully at work in my consciousness. I believe I did not really become a theologian until that point, even though I had written many books on theology and had been paid to be a theologian.

This is quite an important testimony from an important theologian. I trust that this lesson has contributed at least this point: now someone has told you about the importance of the church fathers.

It has been asked, can we be more precise about the end of the period of the church fathers? I would say the general consensus is maybe the first eight centuries. That is as far as this compilation of the ancient commentaries on Scripture is going. That would include John of Damascus in the East and go beyond the time of Augustine in the West.

“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” (Hebrews 12:1).