

The EARLY CHURCH

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OFFICIAL COURSE GUIDEBOOK





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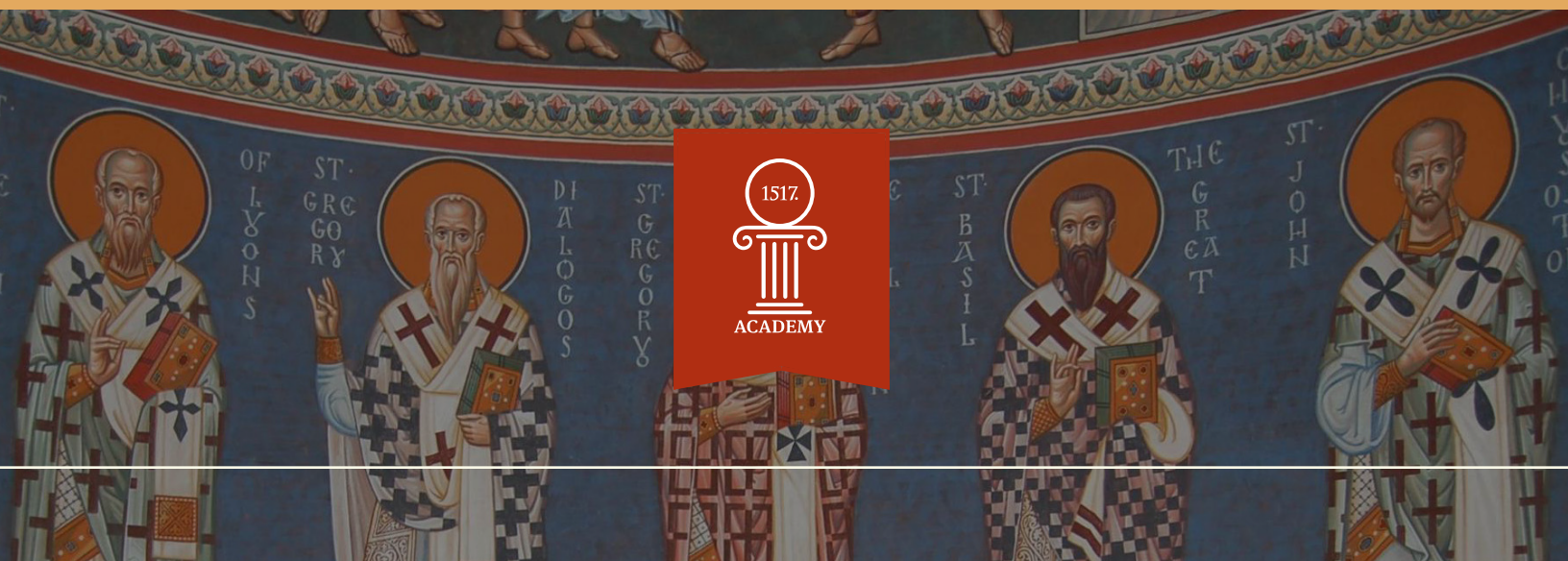




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INTRODUCING YOUR COURSE GUIDEBOOK





Welcome to the guidebook for, *The Early Church: Christ, Controversies and Characters*. This book is designed to help supplement the course by providing additional material not covered in the lectures. It also provides classroom groups with questions for discussion. This guidebook is intended to be used *after* having watched the lecture that corresponds to the given chapters. Each chapter in the guidebook is divided into sections that take you through the relevant material and provoke deeper thought, critical thinking and suggestions for further study on your own. Below is a summary of how those sections are intended to assist you:

SUMMARY STATEMENT

The summary statement gives students the theme of the lecture and introduces the key topics. The summary statement assists students in finding the essential and important parts of the lecture.

THE “TAKEAWAY POINT”

The takeaway point is the objective of the lesson. It reduces the lecture to its most essential goal. Students should walk away from each lecture with confidence and understanding of this point.

GOING DEEPER

There is always more to be said than what can be covered in a lecture. The “going deeper” section is the section that adds more context which could not be included in the lecture. Often-times the “going deeper” section attempts to guess what part of the lesson students might find provocative or strange and adds important context, missing details, or a more thorough explanation. “Going deeper” should inspire interested students



to pursue their own study of the material and give them a better foundation on what remaining questions they have and to which they seek answers.

IN THEIR WORDS

In order to supplement the lecture as well as the “going deeper” material, we have also provided a few quotes from various Fathers to bring context and clarity to the topic. Hearing directly from the Fathers gives students the opportunity to access the primary source material. It also offers an opportunity for further study by providing bibliographic sources should students wish to pursue further study.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Each chapter contains five discussion questions taken from the lecture material. Discussion questions are designed to provoke opinion and demonstrate the importance of patristic thought for today. Individuals or groups who engage with the questions should not feel any pressure to complete all five. Sometimes one question will be enough to provoke an engaging conversation. Discussion questions help students engage with Christian thought from the past, bridge contexts for today, and help students discover areas of interest for further study.

FURTHER READING

No matter how great a scholar's work on a subject nothing can replace primary sources. Primary sources are works written directly by people who lived in the time period under study. In our "Further Reading" section we provide students with opportunities to hear from the Fathers themselves. Also included are some additional academic book recommendations by scholars who have written specifically on the topic covered in the lecture. Luckily for students, most of what the Church Fathers have written is now free online. All students of patristics are well aware of the website: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/>, which contains most of the more famous Father-writings that exist in English for free. Also popular is: <https://ccel.org/fathers>. Ccel.org has the advantage of letting you set up an account where you can save highlights and notes. A word of warning though, while these translations are accurate, most of them were made over a century ago. So they can read wooden and sterile at times. They are free because their copyright has expired, but that also means they sound old-fashioned.

If students really have a love of a particular Father or work, they should seek out a newly translated edition which will usually have to be purchased for a fee. Though their library of works is still rather small (but growing), we have appreciated the patristic translations in the "Popular Patristic Series" by St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. You can find these on Amazon and they are affordable. They do a particularly good job at translation by capturing the Fathers' writing in a lively and straightforward way.

For those who are assisted by visuals, we recommend these two timelines to help situate Fathers within history: <https://holyjoys.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Patristic-Era-I.pdf> and, <https://holyjoys.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Patristic-Era-II.pdf>

Finally, though designed with the academic in mind, students interested in patristics should visit the North American Patristics Society website (www.patristics.org) for recent information on findings and developments in the field. They also provide links to various resources for additional study.

If you are a life-long learner or armchair theologian and appreciate this course, we invite you to take our other free courses online at the 1517 Academy. For more information visit: <https://academy.1517.org> or www.1517.org

LECTURE ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE FATHERS



THE EARLY CHURCH



SUMMARY

This lecture introduces you to the theme and structure of the course.

In this lecture you'll learn:

- *The setting and context of the Early Church*
- *Who were the Church Fathers*
- *How the Fathers are classified by scholars and historians*
- *How this course is structured; its goals, strengths and weaknesses*

THE TAKEAWAY POINT

“The Fathers” are a broad, sometimes disputed list of important Early Church theologians who set the foundations and provided rationale for current Christian orthodoxy (“right theological belief”).

GOING DEEPER

New students to “patristics” (the study of the Church Fathers) may find it bewildering that no official list of the Fathers exists. While one hundred or so Fathers are normally the accepted collection of individuals, some minor disputes exist at times on who should or should not be included. However, the most influential of the Fathers share consistent acceptance in all catalogs. The fact that there is no “official” list of Fathers that is accepted by all denominations or scholars might indicate something about “patristics” in general.

In studying the Fathers, we are not so much interested in how many there were. Instead, we are more interested in what they wrote. In fact, even a Father’s reach and popularity is not often a consideration in whether they should be an official “Father” or not. The reach and popularity of any individual Father, with the exception of a few perennial favorites who exerted extraordinary influence, ebbs and flows over the centuries. A good example of this is Origen (c. 185-253 AD) who was widely read and influential in his own time. However, in later centuries he fell out of fashion and was even considered a heretic by some. Today, he enjoys a renewed reputation among scholars but is denied the honorary title of “doctor” by the Roman Catholic Church for his (sometimes) controversial teachings. Origen is an example of a Father who gets some important things right and others wrong—but whose “right” writings (along with his influence on other Fathers) grants him admission into almost all lists.

If this seems hopelessly subjective, fear not. What makes a theologian a “Father” generally has to do with their contribution to the theological controversies of the time they wrote and the lasting contributions they made which we still enjoy today. The “Fathers” either protect the Church from heresy or provide insightful and clarifying commentary on issues that require careful thought. Their works are always grounded in Scripture. This is why, following St. Paul’s language in the New Testament, they are called, “Fathers.” They are Fathers because they *shepherd, lead, provide scholarship* and *protect* the Church from false doctrines and heresy.

For a deeper context which helps us appreciate the Fathers in a more profound way, we can briefly look at the notion of “father” in the Roman context. In Roman culture, the family was believed to be a microcosm of Rome itself, a mini empire. The oldest living male in a household was called the *paterfamilias* (“father of the family”). He was responsible for the economic and legal aspects of the family as well as guarding its public reputation, general welfare and success. This idea of what a

father should be and do influenced how early Christians saw the father-role in the Church. So, “father” was a term that developed alongside preestablished Roman ideas that then were merged with Christian influence from Jewish tradition and Scripture.

“Church Father” is an anachronistic term—it is given after the fact. No theologian or priest called themselves a “Church Father” though a few, following Paul, did refer to themselves as “father.” A Church Father, then, is a term of endearment and respect the later Church gives to its founders and teachers. Endearment, because it means the person met the requirements of a paterfamilias; respectful because the Church comes to recognize the trustworthiness and legacy of the Father in mind. Church Fathers give gifts that outlast themselves and continue to nourish the Church today.

But what about Church Mothers, why don’t we talk about them? Were there any Church Mothers at all? Recently, talk of Church Mothers has commanded more attention. In the past 30 years or so scholars have begun to show the importance of women in the Early Church. Two general reasons account for the absence of “Church Mothers” in many patristic courses (though this is changing). First, because of the patriarchal nature of the ancient world, most women were simply not allowed to be theologians, hold leadership over men, or teach men. Depending on where you lived, some women could not even read or write. The level to which women could exercise upper leadership positions in Greco-Roman society varied depending on the place, circumstance and time, but rarely if ever were able to break past the dominant patriarchy (one exception to this is in the home, where some evidence shows women might have taught men on special occasions. For example, see Acts 18:26). Generally speaking, ancient consensus was that woman could lead other women, and have a leadership role in the home, particularly with children, but not often with men. In Roman society the paterfamilias was the head of the household and had final and absolute authority. And this authority was seen as a representation of the stability and order reflected in the Roman government. Such a reality meant that women did not participate in much theological work, and therefore, did not often have the opportunity to become Church Mothers because they were not allowed to teach and write theology, or were not given the opportunity.

A second reason we don’t hear much about Church Mothers is that most of what we know of family life in the ancient world comes from male authors. Little remains of women’s actual voices from the ancient world. What does, makes up a smaller sampling of writings than by men. Even rarer are non-domestic “scholarly” or “philosophical” works by women.

For all these reasons and a few others, we simply do not have that many Church Mother candidates to choose from. Of the few we do, even they rarely meet the definitional understanding that “father” carries within in a patriarchal society.

So, are there Church Mothers? Like the Fathers, no authoritative list exists. But popular lists often include: Thecla, Perpetua and Felicity, Macrina, Monica, Proba the poet, Blandina, and Marcella. However, to say there are a small number of Church Mothers does not mean women exerted a small influence on the Early Church. In fact, most early converts were women. The earliest demographics of the Early Church show it was consistently (in its early days) made up mostly of women. The importance of widows, both in Scripture and Early Church documents, shows their foundational aspect in the imagination and practical living that make up authentic discipleship. Women could also hold office in the Early Church as deaconesses. Women could be prophets and prophesy in the Church, but they were not allowed to teach men or condemn male teachings.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think of the term “Church Father” being slightly unrestricted, perhaps a bit subjective at times? Do you think it would be more advantageous to the Church to have a hard-set definition for “Church Father”? Perhaps a more universally accepted master list? Why or why not?
2. Imagine you lived in Dura-Europos and were a Christian in its small house church. What do you think would be very different about being a Christian back then (use your imagination here from what you’ve learned); what would be similar to today?
3. Patristics is the study of the Church Fathers and the Early Church. What advantages do you anticipate studying the Fathers will give you? Do you have a goal for this course?
4. Look up the following Bible passages and discuss why you think the Bible uses father language for some of its leaders:

1 Corinthians 4:5

1 Timothy 1:2

Titus 1:4

1 John 2:1

2 Peter 3:4

5. Father-language is intentionally relational. Implicit in the designation of “Father” are the inferred notions of authority, trust, provision, competence, leadership, protection and discipline. This all makes ‘father’ a heavily charged word. Was the Early Church being too patriarchal by calling its leaders by this term, or was it inviting the Church to see Christian leadership in a certain family-oriented way? Discuss how the term “father” might lend itself to a particular view of Christian leadership.

“A CHURCH FATHER, THEN, IS A TERM OF ENDEARMENT”

FURTHER READING

Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers by Christopher A. Hall (IVP, 1998). This book is an accessible book for the lay person interested in their first trip to Patristic-land. Well-written, short (200 pages), and intended for those new to the subject, the book centers on how the Fathers read and relied on Scripture. The book is part of a series of books by Hall but this is the first one. It gives a generous introduction to the study of the Fathers as well.

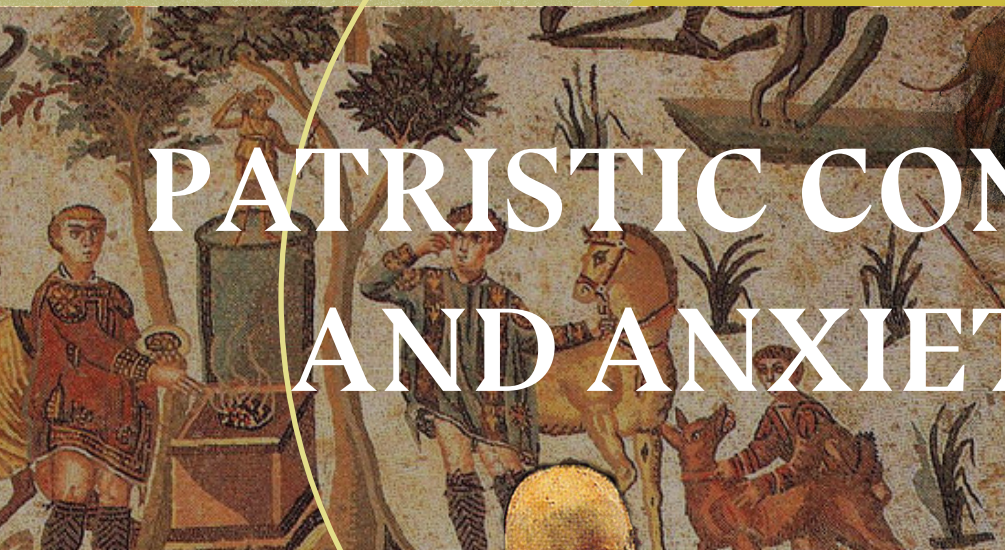
Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue Edited by David L. Balch and Carolyn Osiek (Wm. B. Eerdmans 2003). This is a scholarly book and not intended for casual reading. It is a collection of essays by scholars about Early Christian families. It covers how ancient Roman houses were built, how they were managed and designed. It covers the role of woman, slaves, and children. Because it is written by a collection of authors, some essays are better than others. But because social history from the time of the Early Church is difficult to find, a summary book like this is helpful for understanding what was perhaps the most influential and important context for ancient Christian people: their everyday lives in their homes and their kinship communities.

The Early Christian Book Edited by William E. Klingshirn and Linda Safran (Catholic University of America Press, 2007). This is also a scholarly book that is a collection of essays by various scholars. Covering a period from 100-600 AD (roughly the time period covered in this course) this book is about how Christians produced, revered, used, treasured and conceptualized books. Since Christians are, "people of the book" this work shows how indispensable books were to the Early Church and to our theology today. Building off the lecture's "trivia" about the Christian legacy of the codex, this work will teach you about Early Christian perspectives on books. You'll learn how the codex and books were an important technology that helped Christianity spread its message and preserve its history and doctrines.

The Witness of Early Christian Women: Mothers of the Church by Mike Aquilina (Our Sunday Visitor Press 2014). This little book (160 pgs.) is meant for the layperson who wants a quick and not-too-heady introduction into the Church Mothers. Divided into sections with Mothers that relate to the section theme, this book will introduce you to those women who played an important part in Christian history and imagination. It also shows that the legacy of the Mothers, while less well-known than the Fathers, is still alive, well, and worth telling.

LECTURE TWO

PATRISTIC CONTEXT AND ANXIETIES



THE EARLY CHURCH



SUMMARY

This lecture is about the social, political and emotional context in which the Fathers lived and wrote. It introduces students to the challenges of being a Christian in the first few centuries of the Church.

Key points are:

- *Christian identity was often formed in interaction with Jews and Gentiles (i.e., "the other")*
- *Jews found Christianity blasphemous, Romans thought it novel and spurious because it was new*
- *Early Christian life required adherents to make emotional, financial, psychological and existential sacrifices*
- *Christians were often poor and outsiders had a conflicting moral appraisal of Christians, but Christians were famous for helping the poor and widows as well as refusing to participate in civic sacrifices and/or political and military service.*

THE TAKEAWAY POINT

Christianity's early social context was one of living with contradictions. Christianity was defined by influences of Jewish and Gentile culture. Christians held positive and poor reputations in their communities;

accepted slavery as a necessary part of society but rejected master-slave hierarchies in worship. The Early Church was made up of predominately women, but was led by men. Early Christianity was a unique movement whose contradictions gave rise to its uniqueness, a uniqueness that came from the Church's reading of Scripture from within these varied and rich contexts.

GOING DEEPER

Much has been made today about the diversity of early Christianity. Some more popularly read liberal scholars, like Elaine Pagels and Bart Ehrman, even go so far as to propose that early Christianity was so diverse that what Christians today call "orthodox" belief came about through nefarious and intentional suppression of different-minded groups. In other words, this popular thesis is that orthodox belief (the kind of beliefs that put to language the truth of Scripture: The Trinity, Jesus' divinity, etc. what all Christian denominations today, i.e., Protestant, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox) was the result of an intentional campaign over centuries to wipe out other "Christianities." This thesis is sometimes called the Bauer-Ehrman Thesis. This thesis claims that Christianity had been so diverse from its conception that it never actually had a set of core beliefs outside of a few basic features, such as Christians believing that "Jesus is Lord." If such a thesis were to be true it would mean that the Christianity believed by billions today would not rest on an "Apostolic faith" grounded in Scripture, but in the political wrangling of one group over all others. This group, the group that supposedly beat out the other "Christianities" to become the primary belief system we hold today is labeled the "proto-orthodox." Ehrman and others argue the proto-orthodox suppressed their enemies by inventing the idea of heresy and using political power to silence others (like Gnostic Christians as one example).

While this guidebook does not have the space to adequately critique this thesis, students should note that just because something is popular does not make it true. Scholars are united in the view that Early Christianity was very diverse. They are *not united* in the *level of diversity* that existed or that such diversity's existence undermines an ever-present set of core beliefs Christians always held.

In the last thirty years scholars have reappraised Early Church history and have come to see that early Christianity was rich with the kind of diversity you would expect from a religion that was spread over a wide geographical area which comprised various cultures and languages within it. Particularly, a clearer sense of how Christianity emerged from Judaism, what it appropriated and rejected from that tradition, and how Gentile culture helped early Christianity understand itself philosophically, are now better understood and appreciated. The role of slaves, women, and debates over theology within the Church are now more well-known than in the past, and give greater context to what life was like in the Early Church.

Twentieth century historical research also uncovered writings and documents that had previously been lost or only known in part. Very important was the discovery of a series of lost books in Egypt in a place called Nag Hammadi in 1945. The cataloguing and translation of these books did not complete until the 1970s, about the time that many were available in English translations for scholars to read for the first time. Nag Hammadi contained some fifty “Gnostic” books—ancient works that (upon their discovery) were believed to be the scriptures of the ancient, heretical Christian offshoot, the Gnostics. The Bauer-Ehrman Thesis developed partially from this context, and argued that the reason these fifty books had been lost to history was because orthodox Christians spent centuries destroying and wiping them out. However, it is far more likely that these “Gnostic” books were far less known and popular in the ancient world than some scholars wish to admit. The reason we don’t see too many of these books in existence prior to discovering them at Nag Hammadi is likely because they were not accepted as authoritative by many Christians at the time of their writing. It is unlikely the reason we have so few “Gnostic” texts is because orthodox Christians destroyed them all.

All this talk of suppressing a diverse Christianity by power-hungry orthodox Christians can distract from the important key point: that early Christianity was more diverse than we had previously assumed for much of Church history. The diversity of the early Church did not necessarily manifest itself in wildly different theological beliefs, however. Instead, the diversity of the early Church was one where Christians developed a unique Christian identity through the appropriation of Jewish and Gentile practices while also developing their own, distinct identity as Christians. This often meant that Christians appeared to live with many contradictions. But those contradictions are what allowed the Church to stand on its own and not be subsumed by either Gentile or Jewish cultures. We know from Galatians that certain Jewish influences were trying to reinstate the Jewish law on believers. And the early fear of philosophy and military service by the first Christians show us that early Christians were weary of pagan influence infiltrating their emerging culture.

In the end, it must be said that while Christian identity formation remained rich and diverse, theologically the Church was not as diverse as is popularly espoused today. In fact, Christianity has a long, verifiable history of consistent theological beliefs in matters concerning its core or foundational confessions. Even the Bauer-Ehrman thesis admits this, it just interprets such history as one of a victorious orthodoxy having defeated non-orthodox groups. In areas where there was disagreement, it was often a matter of *concluding* something about God or Jesus that had not been clear before. It was almost never about *rejecting* a previously and widely held belief that was accepted. For example, verifiable evidence exists on the following universal beliefs of early Christianity:¹

- Monotheism, that is, belief in one God, as revealed in the Old Testament
- Jesus as the Christ and exalted Lord
- The saving message of the Gospel
- Apostolic teaching as standard for orthodoxy
- Jesus as Messiah (Lord) and Savior, who is God's only Son
- Christ died for humanity's sin, was buried, and raised from the dead
- The Lord is the God of Israel, the Creator, the Father of Jesus, the Father of humanity who gives the Spirit to the faithful.
- Jesus is God, the Spirit is God and the Father is God, but there is only one God (however, the full, rich version of what we now call the Trinity will take some time to develop. It's precursor is known as "Logos Theology" but as early as Tertullian (c. 155-220) we see the word "Trinity".



¹ This language is taken from scholars Arland J. Hultgren and Andreas Köstenberger

IN THEIR WORDS

Here are some quotes about Patristic Context And Anxieties:

Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202): As I have already observed, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points [of doctrine] just as if she had one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth. For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the Tradition is one and the same. For the churches that have been planted in Germany do not believe of handing down anything different, nor do those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those established in the central regions of the world. But as the sun, that creature of God, is one and the same throughout the whole world, so also the preaching of the truth shines everywhere, and enlightens all men who are willing to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Against Heresies 1:10:2

Ignatius of Antioch (birth unknown, death disputed as 108/140): Therefore, those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day, on which our life has sprung up again by him and by his death.

Letter to the Magnesians 9

Tatian the Syrian (120-180): We do not act as fools, O Greeks, nor utter idle tales, when we say that God was born in the form of a man.

Address to the Greeks

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Early Christianity had to explain itself to outsiders continually. This required an understanding of the similarities and difference of other cultures. The same is true for Christians today. How do you think our culture sees Christians today? What are some of the main problems our culture has with Christianity?
2. The Romans thought Christianity was false because it was new—it did not have the durability of history to grant its truth claims legitimacy. Today, things seem the opposite; Christianity is often derided as old-fashioned and out of touch, even bigoted and oppressive. How can Christians respond to these charges of being antiquated, inadequate, or bad for the public good? What responses do you have for those who accuse Christianity of these kinds of things?
3. Christians faced emotional, financial and psychological stressors that required them to live lives of sacrifice. Discuss your response to learning about these stressors and sacrifices: Did learning about them surprise you? Make you feel guilty? Inspire you to action? Fill you with gratitude? Discuss.
4. Christians also made existential sacrifices. These are sacrifices about identity—"Who am I, and why does my life matter?" Abandoning their old life and lifestyles for Christianity, new Christians faced a crisis of identity. The Church responded by teaching converts that who they really were was defined by being "in Christ." But what do you think that means? How does being "in Christ" shape and change us emotionally, financially, psychologically and existentially? Might sharing our testimonies be a way to answer this?
5. One universally praised attribute of Christians by pagans was their care for the poor and widows. What attribute or attributes do you think the Church can perform today that will be a positive witness for the world? How can we live our faith by meeting needs so that we can gain a hearing for the preaching of the Word?

FURTHER READING

Pliny's Letter to Trajan (also called, Pliny's Letters). These can be found for free online with a simple search. In these short letters, Pliny, governor of Pontus, writes to Emperor Trajan on what to do with Christians and how they are to be handled. This primary source is very important for historians. Pliny tells us some of the earliest information about Christians from a non-Christian source. It also gives us a sense of Rome's tolerance—how far they are willing to go—in regards to the new religion.

Celsus on the Christians. This is not actually the name of a published work. Celsus was an early critic of Christianity and a philosopher. He wrote an anti-Christian work titled, *The True Word*. However, that work has now been lost to history. But, blessedly for us, the Church Father Origen wrote a long reply and defense against Celsus and Origen's work contains most of Celsus' work within it through quotations. Instead of plowing through Origen's large work, students are encouraged to look up "Celsus on the Christians" to see his quotations. Celsus is an educated pagan who despises Christianity, so his view is important for how Christians were seen by philosophers and elites when Christianity was first coming to the attention of the Romans. Origen, of course, also provides us with ways Christians responded.

The Hersey of Orthodoxy by Andreas J. Köstenberger and Michel J. Kruger (Crossway 2010). This book explores and critiques the Bauer-Ehrman thesis listed in the "going deeper" section above. The authors show how this thesis, while popular today, relies on a lot of speculation and ignores other important evidence. It calls out the modern fascination for "diversity" as having gone too far by reshaping early Christianity in a way that is disingenuous to the patristic literature and historical findings.



LECTURE THREE



PATRISTIC WITNESS IN MARTYRDOM



THE EARLY CHURCH



SUMMARY

In this lecture we look at the highly formative period of Christian persecution and martyrdom. We see why Christians were martyred, how they understood it theologically, and how they behaved during and in the aftermath of persecution. Key points are:

- *Martyrdom was seen as salvific. This was not because it offered a salvation apart from Jesus but because it authenticated an interior faith that became publicly, undeniably, known. The word martyr means "witness"*
- *Early Christian Fathers were anxious that the Church obey their bishops since strong, unified leadership was needed in times of persecution.*
- *For many Christians, martyrdom was a form of discipleship, where Christians reenacted the Passion of Christ in their calling to "take up the cross"*
- *Not all Christians were brave enough to withstand persecution to the point of a martyr's death. Many publicly renounced their faith and made the obligatory pagan sacrifices. What to do with "lapsed" Christians lead to a controversy over the limits of forgiveness and the need for a clearer theology of sin. Eventually the question is solved by the Church Father Cyprian.*

THE TAKEAWAY POINT

Christian persecution was sporadic and episodic however, when it occurred it was brutal and sadistic. Martyrdom created a potent

“memory” in the Church that lasts into the present time. That memory is that all Christians may one day be called upon to give their lives for the sake of the Name and that martyrdom grows the Church.

GOING DEEPER

It seems strange, maybe even disturbing, that some of the early martyrs seem so keen on dying. Ignatius’ graphic letters of cracking bones and chomping beasts, or St. Vincent’s question to his oppressor as to whether he would like to eat his martyred body “raw or roasted” are disturbing to us. These people not only live in a different time, but for many of us seem like they are from a different planet. How can we make sense of them and their sacrifices?

First—and it is not an answer to our question but an important summary of context—ancient people were more desensitized to violence and death than many of us are today. While most people who managed to live past their childhood could expect to live into their 50 or 60s (if not longer) most deaths occurred in childhood. Wars, famine, plagues and accidents were common in adulthood as well, and life was fragile.

Roman and Greek entertainment often involved blood sport, from gladiatorial games to massive, dazzling stage shows where people were killed or tortured. One popular show saw a poor condemned young man play the part of the mythical Icarus. In the myth, Icarus and his father are imprisoned in a labyrinth by a king. Icarus’ father invents wings made of wax to aid their escape so they can fly away, but warns his son not to fly too high. As they are escaping, Icarus ignores his father’s sagely advice and, caught up in the thrill of flight, ascends higher and higher in the sky. Soon, he gets too high and the sun melts his wax wings and he falls to his death. The Romans loved this story for its moral teaching of keeping yourself under authority, listening to fatherly advice, and that wisdom teaches limits. They would stage huge productions with condemned people as actors. The show would end with a condemned younger actor playing Icarus, “flying” around the theatre on a pulley system. The young man would be doused in grease and actually lit on fire, dropping to his

death—and all to the shrieking and cheering of Roman crowds. Death was not only everywhere in the ancient world; it was a tool the Roman's used cunningly as entertainment for advancing the cult of Rome.

As stated in the lecture, the Romans used the human body as a billboard or site to display their power. They experimented with endless, sadistic ways of killing the condemned. In such an environment, along with the dangers of death in everyday life, ancient people lived with an expectation of death more than we do today. This does not mean they were any less afraid of death than we are, but rather that they lived with death always being present and unhidden from everyday experience. Death was even entertainment (We are not that different. Horror films and war movies make lots of money).

The martyrs were part of this ancient context but added a unique dimension. Their faith gave them a belief that death was not the end of life. For them, Christ has promised them eternal life in his Kingdom and death was only a door that they had to walk through as good disciples. On the other side was paradise where God awaited them. That conviction of life with Christ after death spurred many to desire a martyr's death. To die was gain.

Early Christians taught that martyrdom was an opportunity and a gift. Not that all Christians could endure the persecutions (as we saw with the question of the Lapsed), but theologically speaking, martyrdom was discipleship. Christians like Ignatius saw martyrdom as an opportunity to show *ultimate* witness to Christ's power and grace. That is why they are called "martyrs" because "martyr" means "witness." The martyr witnesses to the power of God. This is a power Roman and Greek philosophy was always looking for: The Stoics and Epicureans, for example, while opposites in worldviews, were seeking happiness through various power schemes. These philosophies were seeking happiness in this life through various exercises and disciplines. The Stoics sought happiness in self-restraint, and the Epicureans in excessive self-indulgence. But both sought "The Good Life." Therefore, for a Christian martyr to willingly and even joyously give their lives for their faith was to witness to something (or Someone) greater—something so much more powerful than death. This confounded pagans, but inspired fellow Christians.

The opportunity of martyrdom was that it gave the Christians the opportunity to "attain God." The gift of martyrdom was that it privileged the martyr as one chosen to give witness to the grace and power of Christ. For example, Ignatius uses phrases repeatedly like, "attaining God" and "attaining

Jesus Christ". He writes continually of "being" and "I will be," indicating a future expectation of which he is not currently in full possession. He says, "I am in the process of becoming" and "I am becoming more of a disciple". Notice something here that is important. It is not that being a martyr is an act of *making yourself a better disciple*. Instead, *martyrdom is something that happens to you and through it you realize the gift of discipleship*. Over and over Ignatius' letters use the phrase, "I want": he wants to be eaten by the beasts, he wants the Christians in Rome to not intervene to save him, he wants to imitate Christ, attain him and God. We see in Ignatius and the other martyrs a deep longing to be united with God and that martyrdom is a trial gifted by God for their benefit and the benefit of those who watch it (for it witnesses to Christ's power that they would be willing to die for him).

For these reasons and a few others, it makes sense why Ignatius' strange language is not strange to ancient Christians. They too want to be united with Christ. They don't want to die but they want to be with Christ more than they want to live. Martyrdom is interpreted by Christians as a means to be with God and witness to his grace. As discipleship, it is a calling and gift whereby God allows the martyr to be most like Christ (and that is what a disciple is) by imitating Christ's Passion. And while Christ's Passion grants salvation, the martyr's passion grants unity with Christ through the power of witness. The martyr dies, but in watching his or her death, Christ is given to those that watch. We know this worked because one famous Church Father, Tertullian, converted to Christianity after seeing Christians martyred. And it was he who gave us the phrase, "The blood of the martyrs is [the] seed [of the Church]."



IN THEIR WORDS

Here are some quotes about Patristic Witness In Martyrdom:

Polycarp (69-155): Lord God Almighty, Father of thy beloved and blessed Servant Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of thee, "The God of angels and powers and all creation" and of the whole race of the righteous who live in thy presence: I bless thee, because thou hast deemed me worthy of this day and hour, to take part in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, for "resurrection to eternal life" of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit; among whom may I be received in thy presence this day as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, just as thou hast prepared and revealed beforehand and fulfilled, thou that art the true God without any falsehood. For this and for everything I praise thee, I bless thee, I glorify thee, through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, thy beloved Servant, through whom be glory to thee with him and Holy Spirit both now and unto ages to come. Amen.

Martyrdom of Polycarp 14

Perpetua (died 203): And Hilarianus the procurator, who had just received the power of life and death in the place of the proconsul Minucius Timinianus, who was deceased, said, 'Spare the grey hairs of your father, spare the infancy of your boy, offer sacrifice for the well-being of the emperors.' And I replied, 'I will not do so.' Hilarianus said, 'Are you a Christian?' And I replied, 'I am a Christian.'"

The Martyrdom [or passion] of Perpetua and Felicity.

Ignatius (died 104/180): Close your eyes, then, if anyone preaches to you without speaking of Jesus Christ...He was verily raised up again from the dead, for His Father raised him; and in Jesus Christ will His Father similarly raise us who believe in him, since apart from him there is no true life for us...

It is by the cross that through his Passion He calls you, who are parts of His own Body, to Himself. A Head cannot come into being alone, without any limbs; for the promise that we have from God is the promise of unity, which is the essence of Himself.

Address to the Greeks

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The early Fathers were anxious that Christians be obedient to their bishops. Today, we are often cautious of centralized power. What are your views on the limits of spiritual authority? Do you agree with the consensus of the Early Church that a hierarchy of authority in the Church contributes to Church unity?
2. The Romans often required the small lighting of an incense stick or sip of wine to constitute a required civic sacrifice. Christians who refused were martyred. What do you think you would do if you lived back then? What are some ways the Church today is tempted to betray its confession by accommodating social requirements (and this can apply to any country and/or persecution of Christians today)?
3. Martyrdom was connected with assurance of salvation. Biblical passages important to this idea were Stephen's death in Acts 7 and the cry for justice from the martyrs in Revelation 6:9-11. The ancient idea was that if you died a martyr's death you most certainly must have genuine saving faith (unbelievers don't die for what they don't believe in). What do you think about a theology of Martyrdom? Imagine two scenarios where one set of Christians live in a country where they are free to worship and another set where they are persecuted for their faith. Do these different contexts matter? Would you change your mind about a theology of martyrdom depending on which group you were in? Why or why not?
4. Perpetua is a new mom who only gets a few days with her newborn baby before she is executed. Her choice means the child will be an orphan. Do you think she made the right choice to accept martyrdom? Why or why not?
5. Many Christians did, in fact, deny their faith under persecution. They became known as the *Lapsi* or "fallen". Debate ensued as to how to deal with them but eventually the *Lapsi* were accepted back into the Church because of the arguments of Cyprian. His reliance on I Corinthians 13:3 was a key point of his argument. Discuss the many consequences of Cyprian's prevailing view: Do you think Cyprian was right in his argument about the Lapsed? Does such a view lend itself to a practical theology of "do what you have to and ask for forgiveness later?" Does Cyprian's view gut the assurance martyrdom was said to have given? Does it undermine martyrdom as discipleship and witness?

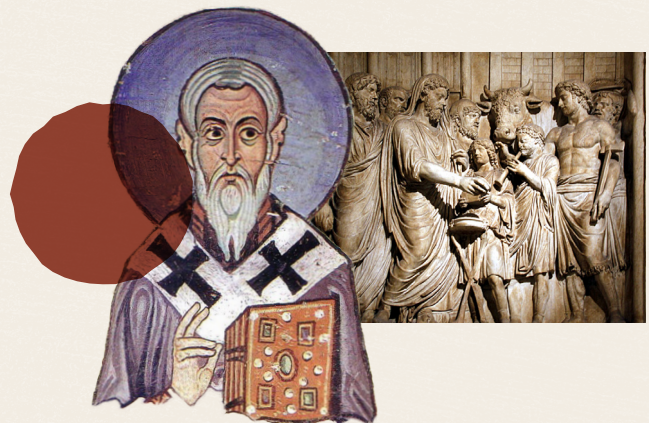
FURTHER READING

Ignatius' Letter to the Romans: You can find this small letter online for free or buy published copies as part of a collection (usually with more modern translations). It can be found in various early Christian writing compendiums. This is an important work of Christian history. Ignatius' letters commanded popularity and respect for centuries in the Church, influencing millions and giving us a very early window into Christian martyrdom.

The Martyrdom of Polycarp: Also free online or in published collections, this small work tells of Polycarp, an elderly bishop, and his martyrdom. It gives us a clear sense of Rome's brutality, the way Christians cared for each other in times of peril, and how early Christians viewed martyrdom.

The Martyrdom [or passion] of Perpetua and Felicity: Free online or in published collections, this is an incredible narrative about the arrest and martyrdom of two Christian women. It's not only important because of its contribution to theologies of martyrdom (and its historical details) but also because it remains one of the few early Christian accounts from a woman's perspective. It was extremely popular and influential in Church history. No study of Christian martyrdom is complete without a study of this work.

Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making by Elizabeth Castelli (Columbia University Press 2004). This book is scholarly and not intended for laypersons who are looking for light reading. Still, it is not inaccessible or overly difficult. Castelli leans on the more liberal/progressive side of Christian scholarship and may upset conservative readers from time to time. However, she is a responsible scholar on this subject and this book has made lasting contributions. If readers are able to glean the historical scholarship from the author's interpretations of cause, effect and meaning, they will find it a helpful resource.

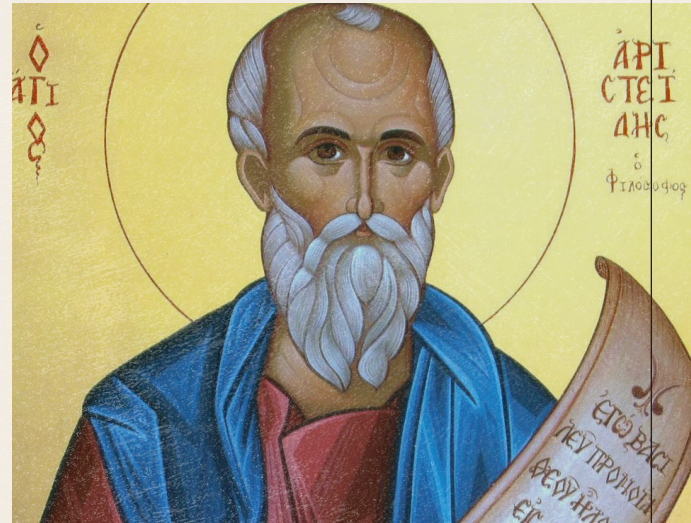


LECTURE FOUR

PATRISTIC APOLOGETICS



THE EARLY CHURCH



SUMMARY

At first, the Early Church was uncomfortable with using philosophy alongside faith. They believed that faith was *revelation* and philosophy was *speculation*, devoid of divine insight and truth. However, eventually the Church came around to appropriating philosophy alongside theology. This gave the Church a rich apologetical tradition ("apologetic" means "to give a defense"). Key points we will look at are:

- *The gradual acceptance of philosophy in theological thought and discourse*
- *Tertullian's non-philosophical approach to apologetics*
- *Justin Martyr's philosophical approach to apologetics*
- *How pagans viewed philosophy*
- *Athenagoras' philosophical work on the Trinity*

THE TAKEAWAY POINT

Although resisted at first, philosophical apologetics soon came to be a necessary and accepted means of explaining the reasonableness of faith to outsiders. Additionally, philosophical language became more necessary to explain distinctions in theology.

GOING DEEPER

The differing views on the use of philosophy between Tertullian and Justin can sometimes confound students. Some students don't see why the difference matters that much; others, weary of philosophy's habit of endless speculation and hyper-attention to words, find sympathy with Tertullian. However, the debate is important because it remains relevant to theology today. In a sense, the debate is not just asking about the appropriateness in using philosophy but also betrays an insecurity that the line between theology and philosophy is sometimes more porous than we want to admit.

Here is a way to think about the landscape of this problem: Apologetics is the defense of the Christian faith. It seeks to present the faith as something reasonable, rational and therefore true. True things are graspable and understandable—at least essentially (not all things that are true are exhaustively knowable, however). True things present themselves to our understanding, knowledge or experience as true because they are *real*—conceptually or physically—that is they “fit” with our experience and knowledge of real life. Sometimes a thing can be assumed to be real but not proven beyond all doubt to be real. That is what the Christian faith and religion is like. Apologetics hopes to make the God we know is real by faith, *reasonable*, because if God is reasonable then he is plausible. So, apologetics defends the faith against charges of falsehood, slander and un-reality.

But this is also the problem—or the challenge. The Bible says clearly, and the Early Church taught, that one cannot be saved by reasoning their way to God. Romans 1, for example, says that all people can know there is a God by observing the mountains, oceans, skies, and living creatures—by looking at creation. Creation assumes (rationally) a Maker. But St. Paul also writes that such knowledge *cannot* disclose the saving message of the Gospel or provide the knowledge necessary for salvation. For that, he says, we need a preacher (Romans 10:14-15). And the preacher must bring the gospel, which is specifically the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection, “For the word of the cross [i.e., the Gospel] is folly to those who are perishing [i.e. the unsaved], but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (I Corinthians 1:18).” That's an interesting point because Paul is saying that the thing that saves is perceived as “folly” to our reason. That means that when people hear the Gospel, they will hear it as something stupid, something perhaps quaint, but always lacking what human reason demands. To know Christ requires more than reason, it requires faith. Paul explains why this is the case in the book of Ephesians. In Ephesians 2 he writes, “*And you were dead in your trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the*

power of the air [i.e. the Devil], the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience...But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God."

Notice that last sentence—it is not of your own doing (that is, not because of your reason) but is a gift of God. The "deadness" of our sinful state means we cannot save ourselves (dead people do nothing), and the reasoning faculties of our minds are never satisfied enough to naturally believe God's revelation. So, salvation comes as a *gift* from God.

And perhaps now you can see the importance of the debate: Tertullian is afraid that the Church will use philosophy and that philosophy will dominate and subjugate the Church. In other words, the Church might stop relying on the power of God and rely on its persuasive abilities instead. Tertullian is a lawyer; he knows how to bend the truth of things through rhetoric. He resists and rejects a faith that he thinks would be gutted of the power of God.

But what about Justin? Why did his use of philosophy become the accepted position? Justin also stands in a Biblical tradition of defending the faith. Paul at the Acropolis (Act 16:16-34) and St. Peter's advice to "always be ready to give a defense" (I Peter 3:5) are standard proof texts. It became clear to the Early Church that, despite Tertullian's fear of philosophical pollution, the Church could not do theology or defend the faith without appropriating some philosophy. As the scholar Diogenes Allen has written (book cited below under recommended reading), "Christian theology is nonetheless inherently Hellenic...it could not exist as a *discipline* without the kind of intellectual curiosity that was unique to ancient Greece. The ancient Egyptians said that the Greeks were like children because they were always asking "Why?" It is not that other ancient people, including the Israelites, did not ask for the whys and wherefores of many things. It is rather that in ancient Greece the practice became a matter of principle. The Greeks did not think of every significant question that has ever been raised, but they did ask questions systematically as a deliberate program until they developed the very idea of disciplines—areas of *theoretical* inquiry. The early Church Fathers...sought to retain a proper sense of mystery, but they too were persistent in asking of the revealed truth, "How is that so?"

To conclude, philosophy need not be opposed to divine revelation; but its use does not lead to salvation. Only the preached Word of God can do that. Instead, philosophy aids revelation by providing the fertile soil where seeds of faith, given in revelation, can be sown with the hope and expectation of growth. This happens because philosophy systematizes things to make them *theoretically* real, that is, makes the claims of revelation logically and evidentially probable. Philosophy working with theology orders ideas in such a way that a person can not only consider the claims being made as probable but, in the case of faith, have less cause to resist the saving Word that comes through the “foolish” message we preach. What this all means in our Church context is that the Fathers came to see philosophy and theology as partners, with philosophy as the servant of theology.



λόγος

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Tertullian believes that philosophy has no place in apologetics or theology; Justin and Athenagoras disagree. What do you think? Should the Church use philosophy in apologetics and theology? Why or why not?
2. The pagan critic of Christianity, Celsus, wrote that Christians in his time didn't even want to give a reason for their faith. He quotes some Christians as saying, "Do not ask questions, just believe!" What do you think of this approach?
3. "Logos" is the Greek word for "Word," but it carries philosophical meaning as well. In the first century "Logos" also meant "rational." Justin Martyr makes the argument to pagans that John's Gospel shows that Jesus was the Word ("Logos"), and therefore Jesus is the truth. He is the rational principle/creator that holds all of creation together. Do you think appropriating philosophical language like this enriches or makes theology less accessible? Why or why not? Other examples of philosophically inspired language are: Trinity, Christ's dual natures, and what happens to the bread and wine in communion.
4. Apologetics means "defending" the faith. Both Tertullian and Justin agree we should do this, even if they recommend different methods. Tertullian's method is to point out the stupidity and unreasonableness of pagan thought and the superiority of Christianity. Essentially, Tertullian's method is to show the Christian faith is superior by demonstrating the holes, gaps, inconsistencies and fallacies of the pagans. What do you think of Tertullian's method? Do you think it would hurt or help modern people today?
5. Justin's last name isn't Martyr even though we call him that (we don't know his last name). He is given that name because he was killed for the faith. Sometimes, defending the faith can be costly. Do you think doing apologetics today is risky? Does fear or risk prevent you from sharing your faith with others?

FURTHER READING

A Plea for Christians by Athenagoras of Athens. Can be found free online. Athenagoras is the most philosophical of the early apologists. But don't let that frighten you away. While a few sentences refer to Greek or Roman myths or interact with ancient philosophy and therefore might be lost on modern readers, the overall argument is not hard to follow. In this work Athenagoras defends the Christian faith to the Emperors.

Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho: If you only read one work by Justin, this is the one. Justin not only recounts his conversion here, but he interacts with a Jew named Trypho. We not only get to see how diverse early Christian conversions could be, but also early distinctives between Jews and Christians. We see how Justin grounds everything in Christ, but specifically Christ as the Word. This allows him to posit that Christ was preexistent to his human birth and active in Jewish and pagan cultures. Essentially, though a bit reductive to say, Justin is the first to make the formal argument that because of who Christ is, "all truth is God's truth." This work is free online.

Prescription Against Heretics by Tertullian. Free online, this is the work quoted above where Tertullian makes the famous comparison to Athens and Jerusalem. The work is classic Tertullian, bold, cankerous, witty, rude but brilliant. The importance of the work is that it shows some Christians, like Tertullian, believed philosophy was demonic, that it was an active power at work against the Church. This work is essentially about the demonic nature of philosophy, because the devil gives paganism its "reasonableness" and power. The work shows us the importance of faith and divine revelation all the while pointing out the absurdity of pagan thought and its inter-contradictions.

Philosophy for Understanding Theology by Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springsted (Westminster John Knox, 1984,2007). This book is a classic textbook assigned at many, if not most, English-speaking seminaries. Therefore, it is at a seminarian level of reading. This book is a classic for a reason. In rather short chapters it does a very good job of showing the important marriage of philosophy and theology, their interactions and limits. The book fits a lot in a short amount of space and is dense but readable. The authors also offer a companion book with assigned readings which is helpful for serious students.

LECTURE FIVE



HOW THE FATHERS READ SCRIPTURE



THE EARLY CHURCH



SUMMARY

In Lecture 5 we look at the Father's way of interpreting Scripture. We see that they employed various strategies and methods in order to make Christ the center of interpretation. While historically these methods eventually came into some competition with each other, both gave a rich and lively foundation to theology and doctrine that the Church enjoys to this day. Lecture 5 will focus on:

- *Patristic exegesis (the interpretation of Scripture) is concerned with telling the big story of the Bible in which Christ is the central and defining person.*
- *The Father's love for Scripture is not just important; it is the cloth onto in which all theological thinking is embroidered and exists.*
- *Typology: A method used by the Fathers to understand the Old Testament Christologically*
- *Allegory: A method used by the Fathers to give Christ to the congregation and make him the center of all Biblical interpretation, usually in a pastoral way.*

THE TAKEAWAY POINT

The Fathers read the Bible to find and see Christ; they read the Bible looking for God's big, cosmic story in which Christ is a central actor from beginning to end. In short, Christ is the subject and interpreter of Scripture.

GOING DEEPER

It is important to keep in mind that whatever is said about the differing ways the Fathers read Scripture, the chief goal should not be lost; agree or disagree with them, they want to find Christ in every passage. The Fathers believe Christ is “hidden” in every passage even when he is not obviously mentioned. Christ is hidden as a gift waiting to be revealed and shared. The Fathers respect Scripture as a living Word that delivers Christ to those who read and hear it, and they think this Word is made comprehensible in the story of Creation-Fall-Law-Prophecy-Christ-Church and Consummation—the big story the Bible tells in key movements or themes. That is, Scripture tells only one story, has only one purpose, and while it may be used to teach morals or give wisdom, or even gain new insights for philosophy, sociology or politics today---none of those are its purpose. To read Scripture rightly, for the Fathers, is to be given Christ. Recall Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees who knew the Old Testament but did not understand it because they did not realize that “something greater is here” and therefore they read it wrong. To not read Scripture looking for Christ is to read it incorrectly.

In this lecture we covered the two most popular methods of interpretation, typology and allegory. These were the most dominant and represented the teachings of two Christian cities or “schools” of thought in the Early Church. Antioch (who favored typology) and Alexandria (who favored allegory) were known as the Antiochene and Alexandrian Schools. But, in fact, the situation on the ground was more complex than presented in the lecture. Depending on the century, and the geographic location, other interpretive methods could be used, or a combination of typology and allegory (which was most common) were employed. For our purposes it is not necessary to get into all the various other types, but we will briefly cover a few that students have likely heard of before or may encounter even in a cursory investigation into the subject.

Scripture was written by men who used their own words and ideas, but under the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Fathers understood this to mean that Scripture had *two authors* for every passage—a human and divine one. Sometimes the human author may not have been aware of the divine author’s intentions. For example, writers in the Old Testament were likely unaware that their writings were part of a big story God was telling of which their work was an integral part. Or, they may not have realized they were writing about Christ. For example, the human writer of Genesis likely did not understand that when he wrote about Abraham and Isaac, he was really writing about the Father sacrificing the Son for the world on the cross. With this understanding, the Fathers called

the human writers' intention the *literal reading*. The literal reading is important because the human author has something to say. But this literal meaning takes a back seat to God's *use of it through the Holy Spirit*. Hidden throughout the human author's inspired writing is the divine author's intention. And the Fathers called that the *spiritual reading*. The spiritual reading was more mysterious because it was not literal. It required the Spirit to discern it, and as Jesus taught, required eyes to see and ears to hear himself in the passage.

While the Fathers always thought the fullness of God and the Bible could never be exhausted; that is, that Scripture can never be understood in such a way as to have full mastery of it, they nevertheless believed it is clear in giving us Christ through God's big story. To aid in understanding the spiritual meaning, the Fathers employed various methods to parse Christ out of the passages. Origen called these "senses" of scripture. These included typology and allegorical methods but, over time, came to be called *the moral reading* or sense of a passage. The moral sense sought to show how love was connected to obedience. Passages on morality, for example, show the goodness of Christ, his love for the truth, and his obedience to his Father. In short, moral readings show Christ's love since love does not betray its beloved (i.e., it pleases them or is obedient to their wishes). Also used was the *analogical sense/reading* which is a fancy way of saying the passage gives hope in future promises. Analogical readings give us Christ as coming, Christ present but arriving with soon-to-come gifts. Analogical readings find Christ in a messianic way—as coming, arriving, adventing, promised, already-but-not yet.

Notice the rich detail of thought the Fathers had for reading Scripture. For them, the living word was lively, a mystery awaiting disclosure. For, that is what Scripture is: a revelation from God, a disclosure of mysteries: who God is, how he handles the problem of sin, how salvation is given to you and me. The advantage of the Father's way of reading Scripture is that it preserves the original author's intention but then recognizes that the Word is alive and given to all generations. That means it is never stuck in the past, or nailed to the human author's original intention or historical circumstance. Instead, the divine author's co-authorship makes Scripture always relevant to every generation because, through the Holy Spirit, He tells and retells the story of Christ through the writings of these ancient authors. Those authors and their circumstances may be long gone, but within those words God is telling a story of Christ, quite actually giving Christ through the author's words to every person throughout all time because God is an author, too. This is how the Fathers understood what we would call the inspiration of Scripture today. Or, to put it more precisely, the Fathers make sense of how biblical inspiration functions and works.

It is true that some of these methods have been overused and abused in the history of the Church. By the Middle Ages these methods of reading were a bona fide science and began to suffer from overapplication and systemization. But the misuse of something good does not make the good, wholly bad. As always, moderation is wise and discretion is needed. But modern methods of interpretation that only seek to find the author's original intention and fail to give the congregation (or reader) Christ, sacrifice the divine author for the human one, or turn the divine author into a parrot of the human one so that the two authors *only mean what is on the surface*. That often leads to misreadings, or overemphasis on grammar, context and cross-referencing (all great things!) but at a cost that is often too high because it robs people of the big story of Christ. To put it another way, if the text is seen as having only one meaning grounded in the human author's intention, then the danger is that Bible passages will be interpreted only in regards to what we think the original author meant. We would forsake the more important goal of fitting the passage into the big story God is telling, and which the human author's words are but a contribution. Much modern exegesis is an attempt at psychologizing the author, determining his meaning not because of the obvious nature of his discourse, but because his discourse "means" what it means because of his historical context, grammar choices, etc. The Fathers would hope to guard against this singular focus on the human author's context by ensuring the big story of Christ is always what the passage ultimately means. If the Fathers are too generous (or sloppy) in their exegesis, at least they give us Christ. If many modern exegetes fail to do their task well, they often create doubt or controversy, and rarely give us Christ at all, or if they do, it is often a Christ unmoored from the Bible's big story of salvation.



IN THEIR WORDS

Here are some quotes about How The Fathers Read Scripture:

Augustine (354-430): No Christian would dare to say [that the words of Scripture] are not to be taken figuratively.

Literal Commentary on Genesis

Origen (185-253): Now the cause, in all these points listed, of false opinions, and of the impious statements or ignorant assertions about God, appears to be nothing more than the lack of understanding of the Scriptures according to its spiritual meaning, favoring instead its merely literal interpretation.

On First Principles

Irenaeus (130-202): If anyone, therefore, reads the Scriptures with attention, he will find in them an account of Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling.

Against Heresies 4.26

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think of the goal of Patristic interpretation where reading the Bible is an exercise in looking for God's big story of Christ? Do you read the Bible this way?
2. Reading the Old Testament typologically means finding Christ "hidden" behind the literal meaning. Choose one or more of the following passages and see if you can discover the typological meanings:

Genesis 22:1-19

Deuteronomy 16:1-8

Judges 17:23-31

Ester 4

Psalm 22

3. Allegorical Readings help connect the big story of Christ in passages that appear more obscure (as Paul showed with his allegory of Sarah and Hagar). Look at the following two passages and attempt your own allegorical reading:

Genesis 7 (story of Noah's Ark)

I Samuel 18:1-5 (friendship between David and Jonathan)

4. Reread Matthew 12:1-8 where Jesus tells the Pharisees that "something greater is here." Notice how he accuses them of not knowing what the Old Testament means because they do not see him in it. Do you agree with the Fathers that this passage is instruction from Jesus about how the Old Testament should be read? Why or why not?
5. Protestants, historically, have preferred the "plain sense reading" of the Bible. This was an attempt to curtail abuses of the four-sense method of the late Middle Ages. Still, do you think "plain sense" and "literal reading" are the same thing? Should Protestants be open to Patristic ways of interpreting Scripture? Why or why not? from sharing your faith with others?

FURTHER READING

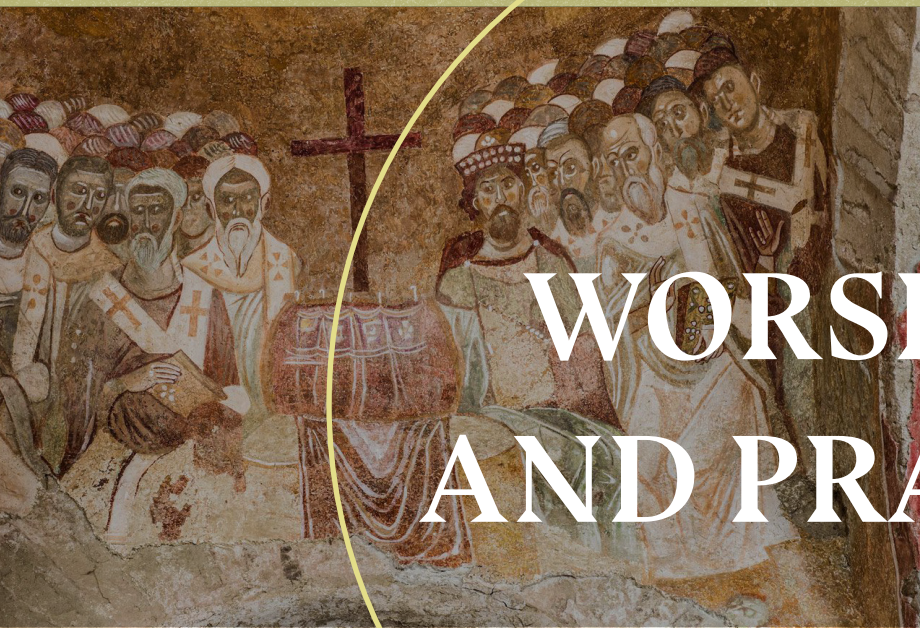
On First Principles by Origen. Free online, this work will introduce you to the senses of Scripture from one of the Church's most famous practitioners. In this work you will see Origen's brilliance but also be confounded at times. His love for Scripture and Christ shines throughout, but his ancient way of thinking will sometimes frustrate modern readers. But that's OK, reading ancient literature can open us up to new ways of thinking, or, reinforce what we already think to be right.

Against Heresies by Irenaeus. Admittedly, this book is not about biblical interpretation; it's about combating heresies. But if you are keen to pay attention, the way Irenaeus condemns heresy reveals the way he thinks Scripture should be read. So, a heretic is one who interprets wrongly, and this work will give you a sense of why those heretics got their interpretations wrong. Some parts of this work will be beyond new readers, as it gets into details about Gnostic persons and practices. But if you trudge through those sections you will see a method of biblical interpretation emerging. The work is free online.

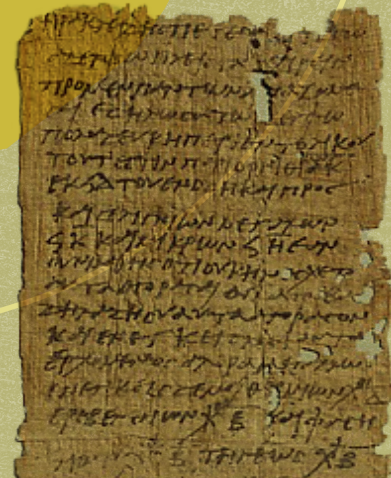
Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers by Christopher A. Hall (Intervarsity Press 1998). I recommended this book in another section, and I do so here as well because this book is written for laypersons, is full of scholarly material, but does not read like a writer who wants to impress others (which is a great thing). For a general interest in Patristics, we'd start here and with the other books in Hall's series.

Early Christian Readings of Genesis One: Patristic Exegesis and Literal Interpretation by Craig D. Allert (InterVarsity Press 2018). I quoted this book in the lecture and I find it a very good work on patristic exegesis. Even though the book focuses on Genesis chapter 1, and the various ways that text was approached, Allert offers a succinct and erudite presentation of the material. This book is not overly difficult, but it does get into minutiae, makes technical points, and uses trade vocabulary that seminarians, but perhaps not all laypersons, will be familiar with. But remember, it is never a bad thing to challenge yourself in new learning.

LECTURE SIX



WORSHIP AND PRAYER



THE EARLY CHURCH



SUMMARY

Sunday worship was the center of Christians' lives in the ancient world. Christians looked forward to Sunday when they would hear from God's Word, enjoy fellowship, and partake of the Sacraments. Early Christian worship was radical for its time, often misunderstood, strict, formal, and filled with art, music, and joy. Some key points covered in this lecture are:

- *Christian churches from the earliest days contained a liturgy that told the big story of God through Christ and was inspired by synagogue worship*
- *Christian worshipers believed that God was present with them in worship*
- *Ancient church was radical because of its equality between slaves and masters and its appropriation of men and women as "brothers and sisters"*
- *Christians believed that worship required catechesis and developed ways of teaching doctrine and enforcing community life*
- *Priests were often, but not always, formed through the ranks in training that began in boyhood. For some, it could end in a bishopric by their 40s*
- *Churches were adorned with art that assisted in telling the story of Jesus.*
- *Christians invented musical methods like chants and were inspired by the Psalms*
- *Prayers were everywhere and narrated God to the Church*

THE TAKEAWAY POINT

Christian worship was centered on telling the big story of Christ from the Scriptures in a context where God had gathered the community together and was present with them.

GOING DEEPER

If you were to view early Christian art you would find some images familiar to us today but many noticeably strange. You'd also be surprised by what is lacking. Early Christian churches *did not* contain images of the nativity, Jesus' death on the cross, or direct pictures of the risen Christ. Certainly, the absence of these images can't be due to a lack of importance in these themes. Early patristic sermons and writings are filled with these central themes. So, why are they missing in the artwork?

There are many theories, but a probable one for the absence of some more famous images is, that in its early stage, the Church was a misunderstood and sometimes persecuted minority. Communion services were closed to non-believers, leading to speculation of cannibalism and incest. It seems unlikely that Christians would want to advertise their faith through images of crucifixion and literal resurrection. Such images presented opportunities for misunderstanding to their pagan neighbors and new converts. Crucifixion was still widely practiced by the Romans and, for use as a symbol, would hardly win their Roman neighbors over to the faith. The cross was a sign of shame and horror for ancient people, reserved for non-Roman citizens and slaves. Although it remained a central theological motif, Christians were not yet comfortable making it their dominant artistic symbol. The cross also had the chance of confusing Romans, who placed such a high value on being a good citizen. Promoting crosses could be interpreted as promoting anti-Roman and anti-political ideas. It could lead to the misunderstanding that Christianity was really anti-Roman. Similar concerns could also be the problem behind the lack of nativity images or no direct depictions of Jesus as resurrected in early artwork. The nativity story was a story of a new king come to earth, a new Caesar, coming into the world. So, it was an image that could misrepresent Christianity as a rebellious group with intentions to overthrow Rome. The resurrection story is likely depicted on the grand mural of the house church at Dura-Europos, but there Christ is not seen, only the woman arriving at the empty tomb. Again,

if we assume that images could misrepresent the religion to the uninitiated, resurrection could be seen as Jesus' victory over Rome's power to kill and dominate.

But didn't the Romans *know that Christians believed all these things anyway*? Yes, in many cases they came to learn the basics of the faith. But there is a difference in the power of storytelling and the displayed, billboard-like power of putting a story on a wall. Art's power is its ability to tell a story, and to do so in a way that each viewer brings a part of themselves to it. The "author's intention"—or in this case the artist's intention always matters less in art than writing. This is because art seeks to provoke emotionally whereas storytelling may have various other goals. The Romans understood the power of art, and so did the Christians.

That's why their early art *did tell the story of Christ* but through cryptic, often hidden symbolism that only the initiated could properly understand. For example, a popular image in early Christian art was the peacock. Ancients believed the skin of the peacock was incorruptible, lasting long after the bird's death. This is somewhat true, though of course the skin eventually decays. The Peacock became a symbol of Christ's immortality and defeat of death—his resurrection. Other popular images are Jonah, Daniel and the lions, fish, the three men in the fiery furnace, and Moses striking the rock. All of these images had a deeper meaning that told a story about Christ but "hidden" through the literal meanings.

From the earliest times of the Church, art acted like the Old Testament itself did in patristic interpretation. The surface meaning was only part of the meaning of the image. "Hidden" under the surface story was a deeper truth (or story) about Christ. And this made sense to early worshippers. And if you think about it, it still makes sense today. Christianity is full of mysterious rites and images that only faith can decipher: How is it that that God is present in the Church community? How is it that bread and wine contain Jesus? How is it that water can wash away sins? So much of Christian life and experience is "hidden" under the obvious. Because Christians believed God was very much present in church—and during communion the whole host of angels and saints—they knew that what something looked like in appearance, was not necessarily what it *truly* was in reality. Thus, Christian art not only told the story of Christ but told it in a way that reinforced how Scripture should be read. It took the ordinary and plain and suffused it with deeper, truer, and more important meaning. Christian art beckoned; it called for interpretation, it presented a mystery that required faith and understanding to decipher. And in so doing it taught worshippers about the reality they could expect and experience in the gathering of believers in worship.

IN THEIR WORDS

Here are some quotes about Worship And Prayer:

Ignatius (108-140): [T]herefore, those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day, on which our life has sprung up again by him and by his death.

Letter to the Magnesians

The Didache (end of first century, date unknown): Your prayers, too, should be different from theirs. Pray as the Lord enjoined in His Gospel, thus: Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth; give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our debt as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One. For thine is the power and the glory forever and ever. Say this prayer three times every day.

John Chrysostom (347-407): If it is true that those who are entrusted with the civic government subvert their cities and ruin themselves as well, unless they are wise and very watchful, what about the man whose task is to adorn the bride of Christ [i.e., a priest or pastor]? How much strength in himself and from above do you think he needs to avoid complete failure?

On the Priesthood

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Early Church was radical for its time because of its practiced egalitarianism. Yet, after the Sunday worship gathering social relationships returned to normal: slaves were slaves again, women were less equal than in church. Do you think this state of affairs was a contradiction? How do you think ancient Christians were able to justify their apparent appropriation of pagan cultural understanding outside church and a more egalitarian one inside church?
2. Church was not a free for all but was guided by a liturgy. Today some churches use a liturgy and some don't. What are the advantage and disadvantages of using a liturgy?
3. The Didache is our earliest surviving Church catechism. In it, Christians are told to pray three times a day because Jews pray twice a day. This is not likely a game of one-upmanship but rather a recognition that prayer is vital to what it means to be a Christian. What do you think about the ancient Church teaching that prayer was required three times a day? Do you think set times of prayer lead to legalism or greater love of God and his Church? Why or why not?
4. The Early Church believed that God was present with them in church and his entire economy of angels and saints in the communion service. What do you think this of this view? Assuming for a moment it could be true, what does it say about the Sunday morning gathering? How does it invite Christians to view worship?
5. Christian art was everywhere for the Early Church. Art told a story about Christ in visible images. Music enriched this artistic context. Do you think the Church today has lost appreciation for art or music? Does it rely on them too much? What are your thoughts about the use of art and music in Church?

FURTHER READING

The Didache ("The Teaching"). You can find this free online and it is a very small work. It can be read in about 30 minutes. Though small in stature the work is indispensable for our study of the Early Church. The Didache is an old work compiled with even older material that was edited into its current form by a later editor in the first century. Its earliest parts come from a time when Christians were still seen by many as a sect of Judaism. The work uses Jewish phrases like, "The Two Ways." The importance of this work is that it shows us what early Christians thought and how they lived and worshipped. You may be surprised to see how little has changed over thousands of years of history.

On the Priesthood by John Chrysostom (St. Vladimir's Press 1977). While you can get this work for free online, I prefer students to purchase the copy cited here. The translation in the recommended copy is updated to modern speech and really showcases the emotional, friendly nature of John along with his deep loneliness at times. The book was intended as a manual to help train new priests. But as you get deeper into it you begin to find John's own fears, troubles and struggles emerge as a pastor who sometimes finds it difficult to manage the stress of leadership in a congregation. Pastoring is not easy--neither then or now. The book is also fascinating because it gives insight into social problems in the Early Church and presents advice on how pastors dealt with these problems.

Early Christian Traditions by Rebecca Lyman (Cowley Publications 1999). This is an Anglican book that is short and gives a brief history of the Early Church, some of the controversies it faced, the social context, and the development of early Christian doctrines. Clocking in at 178 pages the book is written in an easy-to-read style, not too heady, and focuses on important events and contexts. An efficient entry book into the world of the Fathers and the Church.



LECTURE SEVEN



SACRAMENTS IN THE EARLY CHURCH



THE EARLY CHURCH



SUMMARY

Sacraments are signs that deliver what they signify. In the Early Church sacraments were not incidental but the chief and most important parts of the worship service. Sacraments promised God's presence by giving the congregation Christ. They were performed with the utmost reverence and strict adherence to the traditions and rules that surrounded them in each region. So important were baptism and communion that the Church spent significant time and anxiety ensuring their performance and understanding were correct while guarding against their misuse. In this lecture we will cover the following points:

- *Sacraments are ordinary things that are made extraordinary by the Word of God. They are ways God grants grace and presence*
- *It was not common for children to be baptized in the Early Church because the Church wanted to stress catechesis before baptism.*
- *The process of preparing for baptism was called, "catechesis" and one who went through that process was called a "catechumenate" or "catechumen" for short. This comes from the Greek word, "to teach"*
- *Baptisms were never private and always public affairs (unless on a deathbed). It was believed baptism washed away all sin. Over time it became more common to wait until late adulthood to be baptized, with some even delaying baptism until their deathbed. The situation changed again by the mid-6th century when infant baptisms were the norm.*
- *Early Christians believed all of God's economy and kingdom were present in communion because Christ was there.*

- *Communion was the center of Christian worship, the most sacred and important moment of the week because Christ commanded it, and it was believed he was sacrificed and present there for the forgiveness of sins.*
- *Communion shaped Christian worship and Christian life; it gave Christians their identity and was believed to unite them together as one community with Christ.*

THE TAKEAWAY POINT

Communion and baptism were promises realized in the midst of the congregation where heaven met earth and the dead became alive. Sins were forgiven, union with God and fellow believers was ensured, and devotion and thanksgiving to God were celebrated.

GOING DEEPER

Today many Protestants, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox practice infant baptism. The Early Church did as well, but it was significantly rarer than adult baptisms. In discussing Early Church baptisms, it is important that 21st century students not get their arguments confused, or read later theologies back into the Early Church. This is a particular temptation when debates ensue. Today, those traditions that baptize adults do so because they see baptism as a rite of passage, an act of obedience and celebration following a conversion. In other words, in modern adult-only baptism traditions, baptism is an event that happens only and because of conversion. Adult-onlys do not baptize infants because they do not think infants can make a decision to believe in Jesus, and thus cannot convert to the faith. Additionally, Adult-only theologies point out the absence of infant baptisms directly mentioned in Scripture. Modern Christians are usually somewhat familiar with these arguments and face the temptation of importing this late 15th-century view back into the first five centuries of the Church. Such a temptation should be avoided.

It must be stressed that the early Church *did not believe this modern understanding of baptismal theology*. Even Tertullian, whose view is closest with modern adult-only views, did not outright rule out baptism of children or infants. No Church Father outside Tertullian has strong language against baptizing infants. Conversely, we see that infant baptisms *did take place in the Early Church*. For example, Hippolytus of Rome (170-135) writes “The children shall be baptized first. All the children who can answer for themselves, let them answer. If there are any children who cannot answer for themselves, let their parents answer for them, or someone else in their family” (*Apostolic Tradition* 21). Origen writes in *Homilies on Leviticus 8:3* that “In the Church baptism is given for the remission of sins, and according to the usage of the Church, baptism is given even to infants.” Cyprian writes, “But in respect of the case of infants, which you [Fidus] say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after their birth, and that the law of ancient circumcision should be followed...we all thought very differently in our council” (*Letters* 58:2).

As can be seen above, the Early Church was never opposed to infant baptism outright. Even Tertullian, who was against the practice, does not prohibit it but says that “delaying of baptism is more profitable.” Tertullian’s concern is that children who are baptized young will later go on to sin great sins in their youth and, in a sense, waste the washing. Though a plethora of quotes can be found in the Fathers that allow and sometimes promote infant baptism, in practice the evidence points to the fact that it was not commonplace until the 4th century, but not unheard of either (as the quotations above demonstrate). It did not gain universal acceptance until the 5th or 6th centuries. In fact, as one scholar has concluded, “[the fact is] we cannot give the name of anyone before the fourth century not in an emergency situation who was baptized as an infant” (see recommended reading, Ferguson, 379). This raises the big question, if the Fathers did not have a theoretical problem with baptizing infants, why didn’t they do so more often? Or, at least why wasn’t infant baptism the majority practice?

Failure to baptize infants wasn’t because they thought the practice was unbiblical or wrong, but because *they believed it gave forgiveness of sins and should come with instruction*. To put it another way, the Fathers did not baptize infants often because they thought it was pastorally wise to delay until adulthood. What led them to think this way? Answering that will require a more thorough appraisal of sources than we have time for here. But we will attempt a short answer as long as students realize there is more to be said, and more context to be understood.

Two general reasons led to delaying baptism. The first was the belief that baptism granted forgiveness of all sins. Therefore, a fear developed that if given in youth the folly of young living would waste the gift of grace when given too early. Essentially, waiting until later in life gave certainty and assurance of salvation. This is what also led to deathbed baptisms. The idea was to wait and maximize the power of the washing. Though it may seem strange to us, this is a significant and oft cited concern of the Fathers for centuries all throughout the Empire.

Secondly, baptism was seen by all Fathers as *regenerative*, that is, baptism *grants salvation*. But for some, like Tertullian, baptism also needed to be accompanied by repentance of sins. Christ connected baptism, he says, with faith *and repentance*. For Tertullian, this means that preaching must come before baptism. But Tertullian is not a modern-day Baptist. While he shares similar-sounding views to modern-day Baptists, Tertullian still thinks Baptism washes away sins, that it is regenerative: "Sins were remitted, which, through faith in the name of Christ, are washed away for all who believe in him" (*Answer to the Jews* 8). He also writes in *On Baptism* that, "A treatise on our sacrament of water, by which the sins of our earlier blindness are washed away and we are released for eternal life will not be superfluous.... Taking away death by the washing away of sins. The guilt being removed, the penalty, of course, is also removed.... Baptism itself is a corporal act by which we are plunged into the water, while its effect is spiritual, in that we are freed from our sins" (*On Baptism* 1:1, 5:6, 7:2).

It also seems that Tertullian did not have a problem with emergency baptism of infants since he does not speak against the practice. Reading Tertullian on this point is difficult though, for Tertullian writes that baptism forgives sins, but also insists on a kind of public repentance. He prefers children delay baptism, essentially condemning the practice. Thus, Tertullian should not be seen as characteristic of the majority view. Instead, it is better to see Tertullian as someone who does not like infant baptisms and probably thinks they should be banned, but is not fully convinced Scripture will allow for this since he believes it teaches forgiveness of sins.

While the rest of the Church does not hold the exact same view as Tertullian, the general idea that baptism should be preceded by instruction was common. This is because the Church felt strongly that baptism was connected to teaching and that repentance should come before baptism after the follies of youth had run their course. There was universal fear that baptism in youth was a waste of the gift of righteousness.

Eventually, however, infant baptism becomes the norm. In the late fourth century we first see parents being instructed to baptize their children, and it becomes normal and commonplace in the fifth century. Two reasons for this change are likely. First, the Roman Empire had become officially Christian and so Christians could expect Church teaching to be commonplace as their child grew up, thus fulfilling the connection between teaching and baptism. Secondly, Augustine, whose influence cannot be overstated, made the practice the norm in North Africa and it eventually caught on empire-wide.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Communion and baptism take common things and make them extraordinary. Why do you think God takes common things for use instead of uncommon things?
2. The Early Church believed universally that baptism gave forgiveness of sins. Sometimes this led to lengthy delays in baptism. Other times the delay was caused by the need for prior catechesis. Do you think the Fathers were right or wrong to stress teaching before baptism? Why or why not?
3. Baptisms, unless they were deathbed or emergency ones, were always public events and connected to the Church's worship. Today, private baptisms are more common. Do you think the Fathers were right to require that baptisms be public and part of Sunday worship? Why or why not?
4. The Early Church believed that Christ was present with all his power, economy and gifts in communion. Do you think holding this view makes communion more central and important than not holding it? Why or why not?
5. Communion shaped Christian identity by keeping the focus and purpose of worship on Christ and his benefits. How might the Church today continue to practice this devotion and intentional desire to keep Christ the center of its worship and gathered life together? Is that even important?

Failure to baptize infants wasn't because they thought the practice was unbiblical or wrong, but because they believed it gave forgiveness of sins and should come with instruction.

FURTHER READING

On Baptism by Tertullian. This is the earliest work in the Church on baptism and should be read by anyone interested in a serious study of the topic. Tertullian interacts with critics as well as positively stating what the Church believed. Free online, this work is classic Tertullian and sure to provoke and even sometimes cause a laugh.

Justin Martyr's First Apology: Free online, this work gives a detailed explanation of communion from around 151 A.D., so very early in church history. The continuity from then to today is fascinating because it shows the preservation of liturgy was handled with great care over the centuries. Christians should appreciate the preservation of their traditions, liturgical language and doctrines, all of which can be seen in part in this work.

The Didache: As mentioned earlier, we will not expound on it here other than to say this very early work contains instructions about communion and baptism and is required reading for anyone interested in the Early Church. Luckily, it is free online and very short. Can be read in one sitting in a short amount of time.

Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries by Everett Ferguson (Eerdmans 2009). Want to go deep? I mean really deep? This is not for the faint of heart. Ferguson's book remains the most advanced and thorough work on the subject. Clocking in at just shy of a thousand pages, you have to really want to get into the details of the subject. But fear not! Ferguson has expertly organized the book (which also contains helpful indexes) so that you can go to sections of interest and do not need to read cover to cover.

LECTURE EIGHT



INCARNATION: SEEING FOR BELIEVING



THE EARLY CHURCH



SUMMARY

The Early Church developed its theology around Christ and spent time writing and meditating on the incarnation. The incarnation not only was the manifestation of God in the flesh but also meant that the formerly invisible God had become seeable. Therefore, the Fathers enjoyed any chance to let others “see” the God who had made himself known. Although this seeing was in one sense practical, what the Fathers meant by “seeing” was more akin to what we would call “understanding.” For them, “seeing” was a spiritual exercise given to those who understand what is happening in the incarnation. Finally, the Fathers connected the incarnation with unity, seeing the marriage of flesh and spirit in Christ as a foretaste of God’s promised work of uniting humanity to God. The key points we will cover are:

- *How patristic “seeing” is connected with the incarnation.*
- *How “seeing” was better than hearing because seeing meant “understanding.”*
- *The incarnation was controversial to ancients but was central to the Fathers explanation of their faith.*
- *The Fathers think that seeing is connected to loving.*
- *The incarnation gives us God as he really is, not just as we imagine him to be.*
- *The incarnation is a promise of unity between God and humanity in Christ.*

THE TAKEAWAY POINT

Because the incarnation was a new thing in history that had never happened before, the Fathers believed that “seeing” was better than hearing. “Seeing” was a byword for “understanding” and “believing”.

GOING DEEPER

Many students are familiar with Paul’s comments in scripture that “faith comes through hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). Many of us have grown up in churches or traditions where, “hearing the word of God” is not just an incidental aspect of Christian life, but the very source and sustenance of faith, the hope and power of God for us. Therefore, when we hear the Fathers speak of “seeing” as the more important metaphor of faith, we can get defensive. After all, didn’t Jesus himself say after Thomas’ requirement of seeing the risen Christ that “blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believed” (John 20:29)? How can the Fathers prioritize seeing when Scripture seems to prioritize hearing?

There are a few reasons why students should recognize that the Fathers are not trying to make “hearing” and “seeing” a rivalry of metaphors. Both metaphors enrich our understanding and faith. In other words, the Fathers are not trying to dethrone or reduce the importance of “hearing.” Instead, they find the concept of “seeing” more provocative, theologically rich, and more practically applicable to their circumstances. And, they also find grounds for it in their reading of Scripture.

The Fathers promote seeing so much because they think they are being faithful to Scripture and salvation history. The central and most important event in history is the life of Christ—his birth, sojourn with us, teaching, healings, death and resurrection. God’s entrance into the world as a human who remains fully God is called the “incarnation.” It literally translates as “into the flesh.” God has come into the flesh; he has a real human body. Because we have two thousand years of Church history and teaching behind us, we often take the incarnation for granted. Indispensable for sure, but often for us, not emotionally or intellectually profound. But the Fathers did not live in a world with such history. For them, and their pagan and Jewish contemporaries, the incarnation was one of

the most scandalous things about Christianity. Even some early Christians become the first heretics by denying the incarnation. That's how offensive it was—even some early Christians didn't think it could be true.

Where was the offense? In the ancient world both Jews and pagans could not conceive of spirit being flesh. The two were opposites. It would be like saying that you can go left while at the same time going right; or that the sun is bright but at the same time dark. It was just a silly and impossible claim. Pagans and Jews did believe in occasional theophanies—visits by God or the gods to earth. They did not see these events as a true change in the *nature* of God. God cannot be *both God and human at the same time*. But the Christians confessed this as true, even if they debated over the centuries how those natures were comprised and present in Christ.

Back to the point at hand: prior to the incarnation, no one had ever seen God. They may have seen a theophany (such as Abraham's visitor) or seen God in masked form (burning bush, pillar of fire) but never had anyone seen God as he really and truly is—until Jesus was born. For the Fathers, the incarnation was something new, a revelation, a shaking of theoretical and philosophical concepts. The incarnation re-wrote reality, it revealed God in a new way, a way that had never been seen ("understood") before.

The Fathers knew that the Jews had been "listening" to God for centuries; they listened and wrote down his words and Law. Many early Christians also believed that God had spoken moral truths to the ancient philosophers and pagans, like Socrates. So, in one sense, "hearing" had been going on for centuries. But no one had *seen* God—in the twofold-sense of that word. No one had seen God with their eyes as he really is, nor understood him as clearly as when he could be seen in the flesh. This is the idea of translation, that the incarnation is a direct experience of the divine, a real and untranslated, unmitigated vision and understanding of who God is—charmed and amazed the Early Church. Because God had chosen to reveal himself as a human, live a sinless life, showcase his personality, teach, perform miracles, and die like we do, God made Himself understandable. In his resurrection God disclosed the fullness of his plan and love for us. Thus, for the Fathers, the incarnation was a new thing that deserved greater appreciation. And that meant stressing seeing not hearing.

But what about Paul and Jesus' words above? Are the Fathers contradicting or disobeying them? No, we think not. Jesus' words to Thomas that those who don't see are more blessed than those who do

are not to be taken as a condemnation of finding joy in the incarnation! Rather, Jesus is saying that the requirement that God meet our demands in order to believe his words is fraught with danger. The condemnation is not against seeing Jesus (for why then did Jesus appear to the disciples after the resurrection at all?) but against the human demand for God to meet us on our terms. Paul, too, does not contradict the Fathers. He says that faith comes by hearing, and hearing is occasioned by the word of God. But the Fathers have a twofold-sense to what they mean by "seeing". For them it means both "seeing in a translated way" and "understanding." Paul is saying faith is produced by hearing. The Fathers are saying that faith is a kind of "seeing," a kind of love and understanding which engenders trust in God because it sees him for who he really is for us. Paul says faith is produced by hearing the word of God; the Fathers, that faith is seeing, and seeing is loving. There is no contradiction here, only a differing focus that determines where to put the accent mark as we think about Jesus.



IN THEIR WORDS

Here are some quotes about Incarnation: Seeing For Believing:

Tatian the Syrian (120-180): We do not act as fools, O Greeks, nor utter idle tales, when we say that God was born in the form of a man.

Address to the Greeks

Augustine (354-430): Let us set out on the street of love together making for Him of whom it is said, "Seek his face always.

De Trinitate

Augustine (354-430): The reality can that be seen by the heart alone can now be seen by the eyes that it might heal hearts.

Homilies on I John

Irenaeus (130-202:) Just as those who see the light are illuminated by the light and share in its brilliance, so those who see God are in God and share in his splendor.

Against Heresies

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Fathers saw the incarnation as a new thing in history that changed everything. If it is true that the average Christian today has lost appreciation for the incarnation, how might the Church renew a sense of celebrating it?
2. Seeing is the preferred metaphor for the Fathers as opposed to hearing. What do you think of this choice and the reasoning behind it? Do you agree with the Fathers or disagree? Why or why not?
3. "Seeing" has a double-sense to it for the Fathers. It can mean literal, practical seeing (a "translated" vision of God) and to have a deeper sense of "understanding." When you think about Jesus and his incarnation, what do you "see?" What would you lack "seeing" if Jesus had never been enfleshed?
4. One reason the Fathers want us to see God is because they believe that in truly seeing him, we will love him. As Gregory the Great says, "We are changed into the one we see." Do you agree with Gregory? Does understanding who Christ is inspire love?
5. The incarnation means that God can be known because God reveals himself clearly in Jesus Christ. But this knowing is for the sake of unity. The Fathers connect the incarnation with Christ's work of bringing God and humanity together. Why do you think the Fathers so often speak of Christ's work as a unifying work?

**Paul is saying faith is produced by hearing.
The Fathers are saying that faith is a kind of "seeing,"
a kind of love and understanding which engenders trust in
God because it sees him for who he really is for us.**

FURTHER READING

On the Incarnation by Athanasius. Free online, perhaps no patristic work is as popular for this subject as Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*. Reading this book is a rather straight forward experience. Athanasius is in teaching mode here and so he avoids a combative and argumentative style that makes up many of his other works. This book has remained highly influential in the life of the Church and Christian theology. It is a must-read for seminarians, theologians, patristic scholars and serious students of Christian history and philosophy. Of all the patristic literature out there (and there is a lot) it remains one of the most important and indispensable.

On First Principles by Origen. Origen gets a bad reputation because of some more generous and spurious claims he made throughout his life. But Origen was also a prolific writer who wrote more than almost any Father. His importance in Church history cannot be overstated, his fame and respect in his own lifetime as a great Christian teacher and scholar was unrivaled. No one is perfect, and while it is true that Origen's allegorical method sometimes overshot the mark, he remains an otherwise trustworthy, brilliant and erudite theologian. Origen writes with confidence that rarely seems haughty; reading him almost feels like listening to a wise sage or elderly grandfather sharing the joys of his life's work. *On First Principles* is one of the first, if not the first, systematic theology ever written. Though incomplete, (it is missing parts and reconstructed from others who quoted it in antiquity), it remains an important work that students are encouraged to read. Available for free, online.

The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God by Robert Louis Wilken (Yale University Press 2003). This is the best book we have found that spends some summary detail on how "seeing" is preferred by the Fathers to "hearing." Essentially, Wilken compiles this data in an easy-to-read way, saving you from having to read thousands of patristic works and quotes. Wilken was one of the great patristic scholars of the late 20th century. This book is accessible and is a general overview of the theological patristic landscape. Once students know a general and broad history of theology, they should come to this book for penetrating insight into the Fathers and what they thought, taught and believed. Well researched but not overly-heady, you can read this book in a college library or just as easily at the beach. Highly recommended.



EXPLORE THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY

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