

MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN

Rediscovering the Church Fathers

WHO THEY WERE
AND HOW THEY
SHAPED THE CHURCH



“Haykin has given us a user-friendly introduction to the early centuries of the Christian church. He illustrates the key elements of the church’s teaching by referring to the lives and teachings of major figures of the time, most of whom are little known to nonspecialists. Ordinary people need to know about these things, and this book is a great place to begin.”

Gerald Bray, Research Professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School

“This gem of a study sparkles with polished clarity. Michael Haykin has skillfully unearthed buried treasures among early church leaders. As an experienced guide, he has drawn from his own personal journey and decades of scholarly research. He presents valuable Patristic insights into apologetic engagement, missional work, spiritual formation, use of Scripture, theological discourse, communal worship, personal piety, and approaches to suffering and martyrdom. From the apostolic fathers to the apostle to Ireland, Haykin’s investigations masterfully apply classical wisdom to contemporary concerns.”

Paul Hartog, Associate Professor, Faith Baptist Theological Seminary

“In this introduction, Michael Haykin, an eminent evangelical scholar, opens the door to the riches of early Christianity for evangelicals in a splendidly concise handbook of sorts. Evangelicals, who are experiencing a renaissance of interest in the Fathers, need look no further than this volume for an introduction to many of the most significant figures in Christian history. Readers will be left wanting to learn even more. Evangelicals are indebted to Haykin for this well-written volume.”

Steven A. McKinion, Professor of Theology and Patristics,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Rediscovering the Church Fathers: Who They Were and How They Shaped the Church

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To

R. Albert Mohler Jr.

Russell D. Moore

Bruce A. Ware

Donald S. Whitney

Gregory A. Wills

—brothers, who, through their various roles of leadership,
have given me the blessed privilege of teaching the church fathers
to fellow Baptists at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

CONTENTS

1. Rediscovering the Church Fathers: A Vital Need for Evangelicals	13
2. Dying for Christ: The Thought of Ignatius of Antioch	31
3. Sharing the Truth: The <i>Letter to Diognetus</i>	49
4. Interpreting the Scriptures: The Exegesis of Origen	69
5. Being Kissed: The Eucharistic Piety of Cyprian and Ambrose	91
6. Being Holy and Renouncing the World: The Experience of Basil of Caesarea	105
7. Saving the Irish: The Mission of Patrick	131
8. Walking with the Church Fathers: My First Steps on a Lifelong Journey	149
Appendix 1: Reading the Fathers: A Beginner's Guide	157
Appendix 2: Reflections on Jaroslav Pelikan, <i>The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)</i>	159
Index	167

*There can be no healthy theology
without a solid grounding in the Fathers.*

EDWARD T. OAKES

*If I had my time over again, I would have
studied patristics rather than [the] Reformation.*

CARL TRUEMAN

Chapter 1

REDISCOVERING THE CHURCH FATHERS

A Vital Need for Evangelicals

Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.

MATTHEW 13:52

A few years after I had completed my doctoral studies in fourth-century pneumatology and exegesis and had started teaching at Central Baptist Seminary in Toronto, I came to realize that I would have to develop another area of scholarly expertise, for very few of the Baptist congregations with which I had contact were keenly interested in men like Athanasius (ca. 299–373) and Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330–379). At a much later date, when I had developed a keen interest in British Baptists and Dissenters in the “long” eighteenth century and was giving papers and lectures in this subject, I was increasingly conscious that while fare from this second area of study was quite acceptable to evangelical audiences, a cloud of suspicion hung over the whole field of the ancient church.

The truth of the matter is that far too many modern-day evangelicals are either ignorant of or quite uncomfortable with the church fathers. No

doubt years of their decrying tradition and battling Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy with their “saints” from the ancient church have contributed in part to this state of ignorance and unease. Then, too, certain strains of anti-intellectual fundamentalism have discouraged an interest in that “far country” of church history. And the strangeness of much of that era of the ancient church has proven a barrier to some evangelicals in their reading about the early centuries of the church. Finally, an ardent desire to be “people of the Book”—an eminently worthy desire—has also led to a lack of interest in other students of Scripture from that earliest period of the church’s history after the apostolic era. Well did Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892)—a man who certainly could not be accused of elevating tradition to the level of, let alone over, Scripture—once note, “It seems odd, that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves, should think so little of what he has revealed to others.”¹

Past Evangelical Interest in the Church Fathers

Thankfully, this has begun to change.² We who are evangelicals are beginning to grasp afresh that evangelicalism is, as Timothy George has rightly put it, “a renewal movement within historic Christian orthodoxy.”³ We have begun to rediscover that which many of our evangelical and Reformed forebears knew and treasured—the pearls of the ancient church. The French Reformer John Calvin (1509–1564), for example, was a keen student of the church fathers. He did not always agree with them, even his favorites, like Augustine of Hippo (354–430). But he was deeply aware of the value of knowing their thought and drawing upon the riches of their written works for elucidating the Christian faith in his own day.⁴

¹*Commenting and Commentaries* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1876), 1. Cf. the similar remarks of J. I. Packer: “Tradition . . . is the fruit of the Spirit’s teaching activity from the ages as God’s people have sought understanding of Scripture. It is not infallible, but neither is it negligible, and we impoverish ourselves if we disregard it.” “Upholding the Unity of Scripture Today,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (1982): 414.

²Without necessarily agreeing with all that is said in the following, see, for example, James S. Cutsinger, ed., *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997); D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Stephen Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Paul A. Hartog, ed., *The Contemporary Church and the Early Church: Case Studies in Ressourcement* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Papers, 2010).

³Endorsement in Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition*, 1.

⁴See Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999). For Calvin’s view of Basil of Caesarea, for example, see D. F. Wright, “Basil the Great in the Protestant Reformers,” in

In the following century, the Puritan theologian John Owen (1616–1683), rightly called by some the “Calvin of England,”⁵ was not slow to turn to the experience of the one he called “holy Austin,” namely Augustine, to provide him with a typology of conversion.⁶ Yet again, the Particular Baptist John Gill (1697–1771) played a key role in preserving Trinitarianism among his fellow Baptists at a time when other Protestant bodies—for instance, the English Presbyterians, the General Baptists, and large tracts of Anglicanism—were unable to retain a firm grasp on this utterly vital biblical and Patristic doctrine. Gill’s *The Doctrine of the Trinity Stated and Vindicated*⁷ was an effective defense of the fact that there is “but one God; that there is a plurality in the Godhead; that there are three divine Persons in it; that the Father is God, the Son God, and the Holy Spirit God; that these are distinct in Personality, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.”⁸ But a casual perusal of this treatise reveals at once Gill’s indebtedness to Patristic Trinitarian thought and exegesis, for he quotes such authors as Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165), Tertullian (fl. 190–220), and Theophilus of Antioch (fl. 170–180).

One final example of earlier evangelical appreciation of the Fathers must suffice. John Sutcliff (1752–1814), a late eighteenth-century English Baptist, was so impressed by the *Letter to Diognetus*, which he wrongly supposed to have been written by Justin Martyr, that he translated it for *The Biblical Magazine*, a Calvinistic publication with a small circulation. He sent it to the editor of this periodical with the commendation that this second-century work is “one of the most valuable pieces of ecclesiastical antiquity.”⁹

Studia Patristica, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Oxford: Pergamon, 1982), 17/3:1149–50. For the Reformers’ more general appreciation of the Fathers, see Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “The Promise of Patristic Studies,” in David F. Wells and Clark H. Pinnock, eds., *Toward a Theology for the Future* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1971), 125–27. The same point was made by Ligon Duncan, “Did the Fathers Know the Gospel?,” Together for the Gospel Conference, Louisville, Kentucky, April 15, 2010, accessed July 19, 2010, <http://vimeo.com/10959890>. Just as I am writing this, my attention has been drawn to a Roman Catholic response to Duncan’s talk by Bryan Cross, “Ligon Duncan’s ‘Did the Fathers Know the Gospel?’,” *Called to Communion: Reformation Meets Rome* blog post, July 17, 2010. From the numerous responses to this post by Cross, it is evident that the study of the church fathers is an area of great interest today and a needed enterprise for evangelicals. I am thankful to Dr. Roger Duke for drawing my attention to this blog post.

⁵Allen C. Guelzo, “John Owen, Puritan Pacesetter,” *Christianity Today*, May 21, 1976, 14.

⁶See *Pneumatologia: A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, vol. 3 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 337–66.

⁷*The Doctrine of the Trinity Stated and Vindicated*, 2nd ed. (London: G. Keith and J. Robinson, 1752). The heart of this treatise was incorporated into Gill’s *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity* (London, 1769), which became the major theological resource for many Baptist pastors on both sides of the Atlantic.

⁸Gill, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 166–67.

⁹*The Biblical Magazine*, 2 (1802), 41–48. The quotation is from 41. On this letter, see below, chapter 3.

Who Are the Church Fathers?

In an entry on “patristics” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, a standard reference work of Christianity, the church fathers are described as those authors who “wrote between the end of the 1st cent. . . and the close of the 8th cent.,” which comprises what is termed the “Patristic age.” These authors, this entry continues,

defended the Gospel against heresies and misunderstandings; they composed extensive commentaries on the Bible, explanatory, doctrinal, and practical, and published innumerable sermons, largely on the same subject; they exhibited the meaning and implications of the Creeds; they recorded past and current events in Church history; and they related the Christian faith to the best thought of their own age.¹⁰

In another major reference work dealing with Christianity’s history and theology, *Christianity: The Complete Guide*, it is noted that while there is no official list of the Fathers, there are at least four characteristics that denote those meriting the title of church father: their orthodoxy of doctrine, their being accepted by the church as important links in the transmission of the Christian faith, their holiness of life, and their having lived between the end of the apostolic era (ca. 100) and the deaths of John of Damascus (ca. 655/675–ca. 749) in the East and Isidore of Seville (ca. 560–636) in the West.¹¹

Recent study of the Fathers, this article goes on to observe, has tended to broaden the category of church father to include some figures many in the ancient church viewed with suspicion—namely, figures like Tertullian and Origen (ca. 185–254). This article also notes that, owing to the rise of feminist historiography, scholarship of this era is now prepared also to talk about church mothers (“matristics”). There is no doubt that feminist concerns have highlighted the way in which much of church history has been taught from an exclusively male perspective. But the problem with this category of “matristics” is that there are very few women in the ancient church who can be studied in similar depth to the Fathers since they left little textual remains.¹² In the chapters that follow, I briefly note the role played by Vibia Perpetua

¹⁰“Patristics,” in F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1233.

¹¹“Church fathers,” in John Bowden, ed., *Christianity: The Complete Guide* (Toronto: Novalis, 2005), 243–44.

¹²*Ibid.*, 244. See, however, Patricia Cox Miller, *Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

(d. 202) and Macrina (ca. 327–ca. 379), for example; but, though I wish we had more detail about these fascinating women, any examination of them is bound by significant textual limitations.

Reading the Church Fathers for Freedom and Wisdom¹³

Why should evangelical Christians engage the thought and experience of these early Christian witnesses? First, study of the Fathers, like any historical study, liberates us from the present.¹⁴ Every age has its own distinct outlook, presuppositions that remain unquestioned even by opponents. The examination of another period of thought forces us to confront our innate prejudices, which would go unnoticed otherwise. As contemporary historical theologian Carl Trueman has rightly noted:

The very alien nature of the world in which the Fathers operated challenges us to think more critically about ourselves in our own context. We may not, for example, sympathise much with radically ascetic monasticism; but when we understand it as a fourth century answer to the age old question of what a committed Christian looks like at a time when it is starting to be easy and respectable, we can at least use it as an anvil on which to hammer out our own contemporary response to such a question.¹⁵

For instance, Gustaf Aulén, in his classic study of the atonement, *Christus Victor*, argues that an objective study of the Patristic concept of atonement will reveal a motif that has received little attention in post-Reformation Christianity: the idea of the atonement as a divine conflict and victory in which Christ fights and overcomes the evil powers of this world, under which man has been held in bondage. According to Aulén, what is commonly accepted as the New Testament doctrine of the atonement, the forensic theory of satisfaction, may in fact be a concept quite foreign to the New Testament. Whether his argument is right or not—and I think he is quite wrong—can be determined only by a fresh examination of the sources, both New Testament and Patristic.

¹³An earlier version of the next few paragraphs of this chapter has previously appeared as “Why Study the Fathers?” *Eusebeia: The Bulletin of The Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies* 8 (Fall 2007): 3–7. Used by permission.

¹⁴C. S. Lewis, “De descriptione temporum,” in Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 12.

¹⁵“The Fathers,” *Reformation 21* blog post, April 30, 2007, accessed July 23, 2010, <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2007/04/the-fathers.php>.

Then, second, the Fathers can provide us with a map for the Christian life. It is indeed exhilarating to stand on the East Coast of North America, watch the Atlantic surf, hear the pound of the waves, and, if close enough, feel the salty spray. But this experience will be of little benefit in sailing to Ireland and the British Isles. For this a map is needed—a map based upon the accumulated experience of thousands of voyagers. Similarly, we need such a map for the Christian life. Experiences are fine and good, but they will not serve as a suitable foundation for our lives in Christ. To be sure, we have the divine Scriptures, an ultimately sufficient foundation for all of our needs as Christians (2 Tim. 3:16–17). But the thought of the Fathers can help us enormously in building on this foundation.

A fine example is provided by the pneumatology of Athanasius in his letters to Serapion, bishop of Thmuis. The present day has seen a resurgence of interest in the person of the Holy Spirit. This is admirable, but also fraught with danger if the Spirit is conceived of apart from Christ. Yet, Athanasius's key insight was that "from our knowledge of the Son we may be able to have true knowledge of the Spirit."¹⁶ The Spirit cannot be divorced from the Son: not only does the Son send and give the Spirit, but also the Spirit is the principle of the Christ-life within us. Many have fallen into fanatical enthusiasm because they failed to realize this basic truth: the Spirit cannot be separated from the Son.

Or consider the landmark that has been set up on the landscape of church history by the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, commonly called the Nicene Creed.¹⁷ This document, while by no means infallible, is nevertheless a sure guide to the biblical doctrine of God. It should never be dismissed as being of no value. To do so shows a distinct lack of wisdom and discernment. I vividly recall a conversation in the 1990s with an administrator of an academic institution with which I was associated. During the conversation the subject of the Nicene Creed was raised, and this particular individual remarked cavalierly that there was no way he would be bound by a man-made document like this creed. Honestly, I was horrified by his dismissive approach and considered, and still do consider, such a statement to be the height of folly and the sure road to theological disaster.

¹⁶ *Letter to Serapion* 3.5 (my translation).

¹⁷ See below, chapter 6, for more details of this document.

Reading the Church Fathers so as to Understand the New Testament

Third, the Fathers may also, in some cases, help us to understand the New Testament. We have had too disparaging a view of Patristic exegesis and have come close to considering the exposition of the Fathers as a consistent failure to understand the New Testament.¹⁸ For instance, Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 315–387), in his interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:5, which concerns temporary abstinence of sexual relations between married couples for the sake of prayer, assumes without question that the prayer is liturgical and communal.¹⁹ Cyril may be guilty of an anachronism, for he was a leader in “the hallowing of the time,” that is, the observance of holy seasons. Nonetheless, there is good evidence that such special communal times of prayer, in some form or other, are quite early. The liturgical life of the church of Jerusalem in the fourth century was not that of Corinth in the first, but nevertheless there were links. Possibly, it is the Protestant commentators who are guilty of anachronism when they assume that Paul meant private prayer. Such religious individualism is more conceivable in the Protestant West than in first-century Corinth.

Again, in recent discussions of the Pauline doctrine of salvation, it has been asserted by the proponents of the so-called New Perspective that the classical Reformed view of justification has little foundation in Paul or the rest of the New Testament, but is more a product of the thinking of Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin. Yet, in the second-century *Letter to Diognetus*, to which we have already referred, we find the following argument, which sounds like it has been lifted straight from the pages of Luther. The author has been arguing that God revealed his plan of salvation to none but his “beloved Son” until human beings realized their utter and complete inability to gain heaven by their own strength. Then, when men were conscious of their sin and impending judgment, God sent his Son, marked in his character by utter sinlessness, to die in the stead of humanity, who are indwelt by radical depravity.²⁰ What is expressed here is in full accord with the classical Reformed view of the meaning of Christ’s death for our salvation. As T. F. Torrance has generally observed:

[There is a] fundamental coherence between the faith of the New Testament and that of the early Church. . . . The failure to discern this coher-

¹⁸For a case study of Patristic exegesis, that of Origen, see chapter 4.

¹⁹*Catechesis* 4.25.

²⁰For a more detailed discussion, see below, chapter 3.

ence in some quarters evidently has its roots in the strange gulf, imposed by analytical methods, between the faith of the primitive Church and the historical Jesus. In any case I have always found it difficult to believe that we modern scholars understand the Greek of the New Testament better than the early Greek Fathers themselves!²¹

Reading the Church Fathers because of Bad Press about the Fathers

We also need to read and know the Fathers since they are sometimes subjected to simply bad history or bad press. For example, in Dan Brown's monumental best seller *The Da Vinci Code*, the hero, Robert Langdon, "discovers" that contemporary expressions of Christianity, especially that of the Roman Catholic Church, have no sound historical basis.²² According to Brown's novel, it was not until the reign of the early fourth-century Roman emperor Constantine (ca. 272–337) that the Bible, in particular the New Testament, was collated. It was Constantine who had the New Testament as we know it drawn up in order to suppress an alternative perspective on Jesus as a merely human prophet.²³ The novel expresses the view that at the early fourth-century Council of Nicaea (325), which was astutely manipulated by the power-hungry Constantine for his own ends, Jesus Christ was "turned . . . into a deity" and became for the first time an object of worship. Jesus' divine status was ratified by a "relatively close vote" at this council.²⁴ Both of these events took place in order to conceal that Jesus was actually married to Mary Magdalene,²⁵ that he had a child by her,²⁶ and that he intended that Mary be the founder of the church.²⁷ Key Christian teachings are thus the result of a power move by Constantine and other males in order to squash women. As Brown has one of his characters say, "It was all about power."²⁸

Brown clearly intends these claims to be more than key aspects of the conspiratorial ambience of his novel. As Greg Clarke, director of the Centre for Apologetic Scholarship and Education at New College, University of New South Wales, has rightly noted, Dan Brown's book has "evangelistic intentions"

²¹Space, *Time and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), xii.

²²Gene Edward Veith, "The Da Vinci Phenomenon," *World*, May 20, 2006, 20–21. The edition of *The Da Vinci Code* cited here and below is *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006).

²³*Da Vinci Code*, 231–32.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 233–35.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 244–47.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 255–56.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 248–49, 254.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 233.

and “is meant to change our lives.”²⁹ R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, rightly sees the book as a not-so-subtle attack on the central truths of biblical Christianity.³⁰ Since Brown makes clear references to the Patristic era to support his theory, it is necessary that any response involve accurate knowledge of what actually took place at Nicaea and what the second- and third-century church believed about Jesus.

Not only is Brown deeply mistaken about Nicaea, where the decision to embrace the Nicene Creed was overwhelmingly in favor of it, but the church in the second and third centuries had a very high christology in which Jesus Christ was worshipped as God.³¹ One good example is the second-century preacher Melito of Sardis (d. ca. 190). Contemporaries regarded Melito as having lived a life remarkable for its spirituality, though knowledge of his career is scanty. Of his sixteen or so writings whose titles are known, only one is fully extant, the sermon *The Homily on the Passion*. Of the rest only fragments exist.³² In his sermon, Melito, talking about Israel’s failure to recognize who Christ was, says:

You did not see God.
 You did not perceive the Lord, Israel,
 You did not recognize the first-born of God,
 Begotten before the morning star,
 Who adorned the light,
 Who lit up the day,
 Who divided the darkness,
 Who fixed the first boundary,
 Who hung the earth,
 Who tamed the abyss,
 Who stretched out the firmament,
 Who furnished the world,
 Who arranged the stars in the heavens,
 Who lit up the great lights,
 Who made the angels in heaven,

²⁹Is it Worth Believing? *The Spiritual Challenge of The Da Vinci Code* (Kingsford, New South Wales: Matthias Media, 2005), 25.

³⁰“Historical Propaganda,” *Tabletalk*, May 2006, 12. This issue of *Tabletalk* is titled “The Da Vinci Hoax” and contains five articles devoted to examining Brown’s book.

³¹See below, chapters 2 and 3, for the christology of Ignatius of Antioch and the *Letter to Diognetus*. This point was also made by Duncan, “Did the Fathers Know the Gospel?”

³²On these writings, see *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and Fragments*, trans. Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 63–79.

Who there established thrones,
Who formed humanity on the earth.³³

Here we see a rehearsal of Christ's sovereignty over creation, which, by implication, is a celebration of his deity. A little further on in the sermon Melito explores the paradox of the cross and ends with an open confession of Christ's deity:

He who hung the earth is hanging.
He who fixed the heavens in place has been fixed in place.
He who laid the foundations of the universe has been laid on a tree.
The Master has been profaned.
God has been murdered.³⁴

As Bart Ehrman, himself no friend to orthodox Christianity, states in response to Dan Brown, "Scholars who study the history of Christianity will find it bizarre, at best, to hear [Brown] claim that Christians before the Council of Nicaea did not consider Jesus to be divine."³⁵ Thus, when the creedal statement issued at Nicaea declared its belief in Jesus' divinity, it was simply affirming what had been the central conviction of the church between the apostolic era and the time of the council itself.

Reading the Church Fathers as an Aid in Defending the Faith

The early centuries of the church saw Christianity threatened by a number of theological heresies: Gnosticism, Arianism, and Pelagianism, to name but three. While history never repeats itself exactly, the essence of many of these heresies has reappeared from time to time in the long history of Christianity. For instance, postmodernity's interest in spirituality, though it rages against Christianity, has numerous similarities to the lengthy battle against Gnosticism that occupied the church during the second and third centuries. Knowledge of the way that Christians in the past defended the faith against

³³*Homily on the Passion* 82, in *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha*, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 60.

³⁴*Homily on the Passion* 96, in Stewart-Sykes, *Melito of Sardis*, 64. For a brief discussion of Melito's christology, see pp. 28–29.

³⁵Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code: A Historian Reveals What We Really Know about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Constantine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15.

Gnosticism would provide helpful ways of responding to postmodern spirituality today.³⁶

Or what about the challenge, one of the greatest of today, posed by Islam's attack on the Trinity and the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ?³⁷ Broadly speaking, evangelicals are woefully inadequate in their ability to respond to such an attack, for they rarely hear sermons on the Trinity and the incarnation. Here, the Fathers can help us enormously, for in replying to the Arians and then later to the Muslims they hammered out the biblical details of these two key doctrines. Consider the way that the theologian John of Damascus, also known as John Damascene or Yanah ibn Masur, a biblically informed Christian, responded to Islam during the early period of Muslim expansion.³⁸ In a small book defending the faith and worldview of Islam, Rana Kabbani identifies John as "the progenitor of a long tradition of Christian ridicule of Muhammad and the Qur'ān."³⁹ John does use some strong language about Islam, but it is clear that he has taken the time to understand Islamic views and thinking, and has even read the Qur'an in Arabic.⁴⁰

As we noted above, John is often described as the last of the church fathers in the East, whose *The Fount of Knowledge* is the first great systematic theology to appear in the history of the church. He may very well have been an Arab by ethnicity, his family name being Masur, a name common among Syriac Christians of Arab descent.⁴¹ His grandfather, Masur ibn Sargun, played a key role in the surrender of Damascus to the Muslim army of Khalid ibn al-Walid (d. ca. 641). Early rulers of Syria were tolerant of the presence of Christians, and John's grandfather became a key administrator in the Muslim government

³⁶A good example in this regard is a DMin thesis by Rev. M. Todd Wilson of Munford, Tennessee, that I am currently supervising, "Back to the Future: Irenaeus as a Pastoral-Predaching Model for Answering Encroaching Neo-paganism in the Contemporary Evangelical Church" (DMin thesis, Knox Theological Seminary, forthcoming).

³⁷For this point, I am indebted to a conversation with a close friend and my one-time student, Scott Dyer of Burlington, Ontario, July 2010.

³⁸For the life and thought of John of Damascus, see the definitive study by Andrew Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). For brief sketches, see also Thomas FitzGerald, "John of Damascus," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch et al., trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003), 3:70–71; Bonifatius Kotter, "Johannes von Damaskus," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, ed. Gerhard Müller (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 17:127–32. An English version of his writings is available in Frederic H. Chase Jr., *Saint John of Damascus: Writings*, The Fathers of the Church 37 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1989).

³⁹*Letter to Christendom* (London: Virago, 1989), 4.

⁴⁰See Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), passim; Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 76–83.

⁴¹Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 7.

of the region. John's father, Ibn Mansur, was known as an extremely devout Christian but also one of the most trusted officials in the Muslim regime. John succeeded his father as a key advisor to the Muslim ruler, Caliph Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705). After a long life of service in the public realm John left his public position in the early part of the eighth century in order to embrace a monastic lifestyle in a monastery near Jerusalem. John was a prolific writer, and among his writings there are two that address Islam: *On Heresies* 101, a lengthy section of a work that catalogs various heresies afflicting the church;⁴² and *A Dialogue Between a Saracen and a Christian*.⁴³ Let us look briefly at the first of these works, *On Heresies* 101.

The text begins by defining Islam as the “still-prevailing superstition of the Ishmaelites that deceives people” and “the forerunner of the Antichrist.” By describing Islam as “still-prevailing” John indicates the political dominance of Islam in his area of the world. However, he critiques it as a deceptive error and identifies it with the Antichrist, an identification that has long prevailed among Christian authors.

John then locates Muhammad historically and identifies some of his key theological teachings. Muhammad asserts, in John's words, that

there is one God, the Maker of all things, neither having been begotten nor having begotten. He says Christ is the Word of God and His Spirit, only a creation and servant, and that he was born without seed from Mary the sister of Moses and Aaron. For he says the Word of God and the Spirit went into Mary and she bore Jesus who was a prophet and servant of God. And that the Jews, acting against the law, wanted to crucify him and having seized (him), they crucified his shadow. For Christ himself, they say, was not crucified nor did he die, for God took him to himself into heaven because he loved him.⁴⁴

John here accurately relates the teaching of Islam that Christ was not crucified, but that “God raised him up to himself,” which is actually an assertion inherited from Gnosticism!⁴⁵ Obviously this assertion strikes at the heart of

⁴²For translations, see Chase, *Saint John of Damascus*, 153–60; Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 133–41; and Kevin P. Edgecomb, “St. John of Damascus on Islam,” *Biblicalia*, accessed September 7, 2007, <http://www.bombaxo.com/blog/?p=210>.

⁴³For translations, see John W. Voorhis, “The Discussion of a Christian and a Saracen. By John of Damascus,” *The Moslem World* 25 (1935): 266–73; Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 143–55.

⁴⁴Edgecomb, “St. John of Damascus on Islam.”

⁴⁵Qur'an 4.157–58. Yet, there are two other texts, Qur'an 3.54–55 and 19.29–34, that imply that Christ died.

biblical Christianity, in which the death of Christ for sinners is absolutely central. If Christ did not die for our sins, human sin is unatoned for, there is no salvation, and obviously Christ has not been raised from the dead, nor will there be resurrection of all who believe in him. The Islamic teaching summarized by John also flies in the face of historical reality, for no serious historian doubts the reality of the crucifixion, whatever he might think of the Christian faith.⁴⁶

John then goes on to deal with the Muslim critique of the Trinity.

And they call us *Associaters*, because, they say, we introduce an associate to God by saying Christ is the Son of God and God. To whom we say that this is what the Prophets and Scripture have handed down. And you, as you insist, accept the Prophets. If, therefore, we are wrong saying Christ is the Son of God, they also are who taught and handed it down to us.⁴⁷

Here John wrestles with the other key issue that Islam has with Christianity, namely its Trinitarianism. In some areas that had been Christian, Islam had an aesthetic appeal, namely, its utter simplicity as a monotheistic faith—God is one, and there is none other who is God—as opposed to Christianity with its complex theology with regard to the Trinity and the incarnation.⁴⁸ But as John rightly points out, Christian affirmation of the deity of Christ—and by extension the deity of the Holy Spirit—is found in the Scriptures. Christians are Trinitarian because the New Testament is Trinitarian. They therefore must seek to have some understanding of these truths, even though ultimately they escape human ability to fully comprehend.

John is clearly responding here to the declaration in the Qur'an that says:

⁴⁶F. P. Cotterell, "The Christology of Islam," in *Christ the Lord*, ed. Harold H. Rowdon (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1982), 290–95, passim; Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965), 116.

⁴⁷Edgecomb, "St. John of Damascus on Islam."

⁴⁸The simplicity of Islam as opposed to Christianity's complexity is well seen in the architectural differences between churches from this era and mosques. The great church of S. Apollinaire that was built in the 530s near Ravenna in northern Italy, for example, is richly decorated with highly ornate mosaics designed to impress the observer and convince him or her that Christianity is a faith marked by "royal splendour." By contrast, the Great Mosque of Cordoba, built after the conquest of Visigothic Spain in the first two decades of the eighth century, is devoid of any images and extremely simple in design and ornamentation. This simplicity in architectural design matched the simplicity of Islamic theology and proved to be attractive to some. See Yoram Tsafrir, "Ancient Churches in the Holy Land," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 19, no. 5 (October 1993): 30; Robert Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1988), 173.

People of the Book, do not go to excess in your religion, and do not say anything about God except the truth: the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was nothing more than a messenger of God, His word, conveyed to Mary, a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers and do not speak of a "Trinity"—stop [this], that is better for you—God is only one God, He is far above having a son.⁴⁹

We see here something of the fierce monotheism of Islam. John's response must ultimately be our response: But what does the New Testament claim and what does our Lord Jesus say of himself? Difficult to comprehend though the doctrine of the Trinity is, it is biblical truth and we need to know how to proclaim it.

In another text in which John of Damascus explicates the heart of the Christian faith, *The Orthodox Faith*, he says the following about the redemption that Christ has brought, and although he does not mention Islam explicitly, a clear contrast is being made between the two faiths: Since the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ,

altars and temples of idols have been overthrown. Knowledge of God has been implanted. The consubstantial Trinity, the uncreated Godhead is worshipped, one true God, Creator and Lord of all. Virtue is practiced. Hope of the resurrection has been granted through the resurrection of Christ. The demons tremble at the men who were formerly in their power. Yes, and most wonderful of all is that all these things were successfully brought about through a cross and suffering and death. The Gospel of the knowledge of God has been preached to the whole world and has put the adversaries to flight not by war and arms and camps. Rather, it was a few unarmed, poor, unlettered, persecuted, tormented, done-to-death men, who, by preaching One who had died crucified in the flesh, prevailed over the wise and powerful, because the almighty power of the Crucified was with them. That death which was once so terrible has been defeated and He who was once despised and hated is now preferred before life. These are the successes consequent upon the advent of the Christ; these are the signs of His power. . . .

O Christ, O wisdom and power and Word of God, and God almighty! What should we resourceless people give You in return for all things? For all things are Yours and You ask nothing of us but that we be saved. [And]

⁴⁹Qur'an 4.171. See also Qur'an 5.72–73 and 5.116–17, which include Mary in the Trinity.

even this You have given us, and by Your ineffable goodness You are gracious to those who accept it.⁵⁰

Reading the Church Fathers for Spiritual Nurture

Christians, like all human beings, are historical beings. Their lives are inextricably tied to the past, their own immediate past and that of other humans. As Gilbert Beers, a past editor of *Christianity Today*, has noted, “We owe much to many whom we have never met.” In times past, when there was a reverence for the past, this reality was acknowledged gratefully. But as Beers goes on to note, “We live in a throwaway society; we dispose of things we consider a burden. My concern is that we do not add our predecessors to the collection of throwaways, carelessly discarding those who have made us what we are.”⁵¹ The study of the church fathers, like the study of church history in general, informs Christians about their predecessors in the faith, those who have helped shape their Christian communities and thus make them what they are. Such study builds humility and modesty into the warp and woof of the Christian life and as such can exercise a deeply sanctifying influence.

In Hebrews 13:7, the author of this portion of Holy Scripture urges his readers to “remember” their past leaders, those who had spoken God’s Word to them. They are to closely scrutinize (*anatheōrountes*) the “outcome” — “sum total” or “achievement” (*ekbasin*) — of their day-to-day behavior, manifested in a whole life.⁵² Here is a key reason for studying the history of the church and the church fathers in particular. In the confessors and martyrs of the pre-Constantinian era, for example, we have many models of what it means to be a Christian in a hostile society, a situation that faces many believers around the world today, and increasingly so in the West.⁵³ And then during those days in the fourth century when the doctrine of the deity of Christ and his Spirit were under attack, we again have models of what it means to be committed to doctrinal fidelity. In this regard it is noteworthy that one of the fathers of Methodism, John Wesley (1703–1791), could cite the example of Athanasius’s doggedness in defending the deity of Jesus in a letter of encouragement to the young abolitionist William Wilberforce (1759–1833). Writing but a week

⁵⁰ *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 4.4, in Chase, *Saint John of Damascus*, 338–39, altered.

⁵¹ *Christianity Today*, November 26, 1982, 12.

⁵² Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 569; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, Word Biblical Commentary 47b (Dallas: Word, 1991), 522.

⁵³ Trueman, “The Fathers.”

before his death, the aged Christian evangelist told Wilberforce concerning his fight against the slave trade:

Unless the Divine power has raised you up to be as an Athanasius *contra mundum*, I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise, in opposing that execrable villainy which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils; but if God be for you who can be against you. Are all of them together stronger than God? Oh be not weary of well-doing. Go on in the name of God, and in the power of His might, till even American slavery, the vilest that ever saw the sun, shall vanish away before it.⁵⁴

Wesley begins this fascinating letter with a reference to Athanasius's defense of the deity of Christ for over thirty years despite exile and persecution. Athanasius was only able to maintain this fight, Wesley implies, because God enabled him to persevere. Likewise, unless God empowers Wilberforce in the struggle to abolish the institution of slavery, he will fall before those who support this "execrable villainy."

There is no doubt that generations of believers have found in the writings of men like Basil and Augustine soul-nourishing food, of which evangelicals in the past have been well aware. Wesley, for example, published a fifty-volume collection of spiritual classics, *The Christian Library* (1750), for his lay preachers. What is noteworthy is his inclusion of a number of Patristic spiritual classics: some of the writings of the apostolic fathers, the acts of early Christian martyrs, and the spiritually rich sermons of Macarius Symeon (fl. fourth century). Evangelical believers need to recapture the wisdom in this regard of our spiritual forebears.

This Book on the Church Fathers

These reasons are only a start toward giving a full answer to the question, why study the Fathers?⁵⁵ There are certainly other reasons for studying these ancient authors that may be more obvious or even more important. But the reasons given above sufficiently indicate the need for Patristic studies in the ongoing life of the church: to aid in her liberation from the *Zeitgeist* of the

⁵⁴Frank Whaling, ed., *John and Charles Wesley: Selected Prayers, Hymns, Journal Notes, Sermons, Letters and Treatises* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 170–71.

⁵⁵See further, Paul A. Hartog, "The Complexity and Variety of Contemporary Church—Early Church Engagements," in Hartog, *Contemporary Church and the Early Church*, 1–26.

twenty-first century; to provide a guide in her walk with Christ; to help her understand the basic witness to her faith, the New Testament; to refute bad histories of the ancient church; and to be a vehicle of spiritual nurture.

In this book, I seek to commend the reading and prayerful study of the church fathers by looking at several case studies, as it were. The specific church fathers that have been chosen—Ignatius of Antioch (fl. 80–107), the author of the *Letter to Diognetus*, Origen (ca. 185–254), Cyprian (ca. 200–258), Ambrose (ca. 339–397), Basil of Caesarea, and Patrick (ca. 389–ca. 461)—are men that I have listened to and walked with now for more than three decades.⁵⁶ But others could have served just as well as an introduction to the Fathers—men like Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–ca. 200), Athanasius, or the other two Cappadocians besides Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 329–389/390) and Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–ca. 394). What was critical was not primarily the choice of figures but the issues that they wrestled with in their lives as believers, for these issues are central to the Patristic era: martyrdom, monasticism, and discipleship; witness to an unbelieving world and mission; the canon and interpretation of Scripture; and the supreme issue of this era, the doctrine of the Trinity and worship.

One final word about the Fathers before we plunge into their world of long ago. The Fathers are not Scripture. They are senior conversation partners about Scripture and its meaning. We listen to them respectfully, but are not afraid to disagree when they err. As the Reformers rightly argued, the writings of the Fathers must be subject to Scripture. John Jewel (1522–1571), the Anglican apologist, put it well when he stated:

But what say we of the fathers, Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Cyprian, etc.? What shall we think of them, or what account may we make of them? They be interpreters of the word of God. They were learned men, and learned fathers; the instruments of the mercy of God, and vessels full of grace. We despise them not, we read them, we reverence them, and give thanks unto God for them. They were witnesses unto the truth, they were worthy pillars and ornaments in the church of God. Yet may they not be compared with the word of God. We may not build upon them: we may not make them the foundation and warrant of our conscience: we may not put our trust in them. Our trust is in the name of the Lord.⁵⁷

⁵⁶See below, chapter 8, for reflection on this walk with the Fathers.

⁵⁷Cited in Barrington R. White, “Why Bother with History?,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 4 (July 1969): 85.

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CHURCH HISTORY

