



Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers: Focusing Concern and Action

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Many Christians today long to become reacquainted with their ancient ancestors in the faith. They see a deeper worship and devotion in the prayers and hymns of the early church. And they believe that the writings of the early church can shed new light on their understanding of Scripture. But where and how do we begin? Our first encounter with the writings of the church fathers may seem like visiting a far country where the language, assumptions, concerns and conclusions are completely unfamiliar to us. In *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* Christopher Hall helps us through this cultural confusion, introducing us to the early church, its unique world, and the sights and sounds of Scripture that are highlighted for them. As Hall points out, the ancient fathers hear music in Scripture where we remain tone-deaf. Despite their occasional eccentricities, theirs is a hearing refined through long listening in song, worship, teaching, meditation and oral reading. And like true masters they challenge and correct our modern assumptions as they invite us to tune our ears to hear the divine melodies of the Bible. *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* is an exceptional guide. Hall provides a warm, winsome, informative and indispensable introduction to who these leaders and scholars were, how they read and interpreted Scripture, and how we might read Scripture with them for all its worth.

Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers: Focusing Concern and Action Details

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Ferrell says

This is a wonderful book. It opened my eyes to the Christian writers of the third to sixth centuries. We contemporary readers are not the first to see some of the difficulties in Scripture and seek to find ways to make sense of God's revelation for a particular time. These ancient writers are shown by Hall to offer some genuine insight for followers of Christ today.

Phil says

This is the last in a series of re-reads for me. In fact, this particular book has been rather formational for me; a fact that I couldn't have anticipated when I bought it around 1997-1998 on a whim (I was at loose ends in a book store and this caught my attention, in the days when I still impulse bought books). It sat on my shelf for two or three years, but I picked it up after I left my PhD program in 2000. I'm sure the fact that I had been pursuing a Classics degree set me up for an interest in patristics, but this book started me off on was, for a time, one of my typical scholarly obsessions. I retain an interest now, of course, but patristics is no longer the only thing I read these days.

Christopher Hall's book is a kind of companion volume to Intervarsity Press' Patristic commentaries to the books of the Bible. It is meant to make the case for reading the Church Fathers, especially for Evangelicals. It was part of a Evangelical resourcement, parallel to the Catholic resourcement around the time of Vatican II, but even more unlikely given Protestant hostility to reading the Church Fathers, especially in the modern period. Hall makes the case for reading these early Christian writers, based on their attitude to Scripture. It is a convincing case, especially for the history nerd who has a strong respect for tradition. I won't go into the details of Hall's case, but it makes a strong case that we need to reconnect to the traditional authors of Christianity, if only to counteract our own post-modern theological predilections. Hall is a convert to this view, so he has the zeal of the convert, but he is rigorous and persuasive.

This is, in my opinion, the best of the introductions to the Fathers produced in the Evangelical resourcement. It is also the introductory volume to a trilogy which also address theology and worship. The last I heard is that there is plans for a fourth one, dealing with social justice, but still no word on release for that. Meanwhile, if you are interested in the Church Fathers, this is a must read introduction.

Christopher says

I really enjoyed this book. Hall gives an excellent sampling of the ideas and theology of church fathers, both from Eastern and Western traditions. The church fathers did their biblical exegesis without the aid of much of the historical, linguistic, and hermeneutical tools available to the modern exegete. One thing that is valuable in church father's interpretation of scripture is what Hall identifies as hermeneutical proximity. Today, we are 20 centuries removed from the authors of the New Testament. And, as such, they were closer to the climate in which the New Testament was born and consequently had unique insights into the spirit and intent of the scriptures that may elude the modern exegete.

Also, Hall stresses that all of the church fathers were either pastors or bishops and their exegesis was done within that context. As such, the need for the scriptures to be read and interpreted within a context of prayer and community is paramount. For a proper understanding of scripture, the fathers teach us that it can not be approached abstractly, as a mere mental stimulant, but must be interpreted within one's daily relationship with God, its relationship to the community in which it was created, and the work and power of the Spirit within the believer.

Lastly, Hall does a great job of presenting the Fathers as a vital part of our Christian heritage and are therefore indispensable in gaining a proper perspective and understanding of scripture. The last sentence of the book sums this up: "I invite you to read the fathers because they are part of your family, relatives perhaps long forgotten who long to be remembered as part of the family tree. For too long they have been shut out of the family circle. Welcome them home."(p. 200)"

I recommend this book to anyone wishing to learn more about patristic literature and its relationship to modern day faith. The words of an admonishment given to the theologian, Thomas Oden, are highly appropriate: "...his overall understanding and theological perspective would remain grossly misshapen unless he supplemented his immersion in modern theological sources with a concentrated exposure to the world of the church fathers. (p. 17)"

Thomas Reeves says

Very thoughtful and good introduction to the Church Fathers especially written for those from a Protestant and Individualistic Christian background. Unfortunately, most clergy and parishioners will likely give up too early on this book before understanding the benefits awaiting them. I would recommend this book to anyone, but I would encourage you to read the final chapter first (chapter 8) so as to bolster your resolve in your discipline to understand and benefit from this book.

Christopher Hall has a strong grasp of the audience that he is writing to and does a nice job preparing them not only to be introduced to some of the central Western and Eastern Patristic Fathers but also to the importance of the Fathers for belief and life today.

The last chapter alone is worth the purchase of the book especially for American Christians who value their Christianity and their "personal relationship with the Lord" as the center of their universe because they believe themselves (and God's interest in them) to be what really matters in life. Not only will the truths in this book potentially ground a teachable heart to the Word, Scriptures, it might also save some from turning away from Christianity and/or the church.

Too often, people not grounded in the core foundations of their faith (and how their beliefs have been handed down from the faithful Covenant People of God) will begin to be disillusioned with Jesus and his church when the church disappoints them, or when Jesus doesn't show up on their timetable. When questioning their faith, and while the world around them offers them so many options, a foundational "big picture" and the greatness of God in the past, present, and future can help stabilize them as they navigate life.

My criticism of the book also comes from statements in the last chapter which reveal the "Protestant Angst" that comes in admitting that we all have informing traditions. The writer (quoting another Evangelical Scholar) talks of the need for different traditions not to "shove their traditions on others". Valid point, but that said, the phrase should be "shove SOME of their traditions" on others. The one, holy, catholic and apostolic

church, DOES have quite a bit of core tradition that MUST be insisted upon, and no cross-reference verse in scripture is going to clear it up for us outside of communal interpretation.

The concepts of a slowly gathered Biblical Cannon developed over thousands of years IN AND WITH THE COVENANT COMMUNITY OF CHRIST (both old and new covenants) insists that there is core tradition that we DO insist on, no matter what Christian group it is. There was a relationship with a Covenant Communal People and our Lord before a word of Scripture was penned (both Old and New Testaments). Through the Holy Spirit, He used the faithful people of God in Community to pen, gather, assemble and disseminate our Holy Cannon. He used the Councils to clarify the Incarnation of Christ, and the Triune beliefs about our saving covenant God (neither of the words " Incarnate" or "Trinity" appear in scripture). This means that the Spirit DOES establish and insist on good and non-optional tradition, no matter the tensions and mystery involved. Supra-scriptura, YES. Sola-scriptura has NEVER been true.

Drew Van Gorder says

This was a good introduction to the interpretive methods used by the church fathers during the Patristic period. However it was relatively disjointed in its reading style and approach to the topic. The information was good and the point was relevant, but the writing style itself could have been better.

Jacob Aitken says

The book turned out much better than I expected it to be. The author avoided anachronisms and the scope of the text, while very limited, skillfully outlined the Church Fathers' (more on that elusive term later) handling of Scripture.

Christopher Hall argues that Evangelicals should make the Church Fathers routine conversation partners in our interpretation of Scripture. Not to make them the last word, since much of their exegesis is rather forced, but because a regular *re*reading of the Church Fathers provides an important epistemological service: it forces us to examine our own presuppositions and culture as we come to the text.

What is a Church Father? Admittedly, any definition of this term is somewhat arbitrary. Hall summarizes the definition along the lines of someone who has received traditional teaching (Hall 50; cf Irenaeus) and faithfully preserved conciliar conclusions. A Church father must have antiquity, holiness of life (although this can be stretched when it comes to things like temper and gentleness) and orthodox doctrine. Granted, a number of questions are begged at this point, but we must move on.

Hall then survey eight fathers: four Eastern (Athanasius, Nazianzus, Basil, and Chrysostom) and four Western (Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory the Great) and points the reader to certain works. Much of this section is a summary of what you would find in textbooks on the Nicene and post-Nicene period. I won't go into it here.

He then contrasts the allegorizing of Alexandria with the more literal approach of Antioch.

What can we take from the Church Fathers? Unlike modern academic tendencies, they did not divorce the reading of Scripture and the doing of theology from liturgy (happily, with the coming demise of the German-

based post-graduate system in America, we might be approaching a period when this is possible).

Even more, the Fathers had mnemonic powers that Americans can only dream of. This allowed them to be remarkably sensitive to motifs in Scripture that a concordance might miss. While Hall doesn't cover this, to be a bishop in the ancient church one must have memorized the entire Psalter. (And later, to be a Cossack warrior in Russia one must also have memorized the Psalter. When you get captured by Muslimists chanting the Psalter would help you endure torture).

And to be honest, if you want to memorize large chunks of Scripture, you probably need to chant it. Not recite it nor re-read it, but chant it. That's likely why John Chrysostom had the entire Bible memorized.

As a whole the book is outstanding. Some repetition and for those who have read widely on the Nicene debates, parts of the book can be skipped. On the other hand, this is probably the best introduction to the Church Fathers.

Argin Gerigorian says

A very good book and highly recommended for everyone.

The debate of who has the early church fathers on their side will be a debate only to end in heaven, and being a paleo-orthodox Mr. Hall wants them too.

Paleo-orthodox in short is a Protestant movement that wants to go back and hold to the consensus of the fathers expounded in the ecumenical creeds.

Hall makes a lot of good points to put in to perspective some of the debates between Westerners and Easterners. Coming from the West we have to look at the church fathers with a higher view than is presently the case. They were not stupid (contrary to popular opinion) and had many correct beliefs. The East also has to look at us and see some of the reasons why we broke off (lack of leadership, apostasy, etc.) The Protestants weren't the schismatics but the Romanists were. They went head long into apostasy and departure from the eternal "truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14) That is one of the things that is dangerous in an Eastern/Popish hierarchical system; all the power is invested in a clergy who can decide on what the truth is. And contrary to Eastern/Popish view, Protestants aren't individual popes with their own interpretation of every text (although there are Protestants who do this) but the original reformation did not seek to usurp the authority of the church and set up the authority of the individual. Both have there place.

the Enlightenment, Hall explains disturbed a lot of what was going on in early Protestantism. (pg. 13, 25, etc.) For the Reformers "sola Scriptura" did not mean my autonomous interpretation vs. your autonomous interpretation, but proper interaction with early church fathers (like Calvin, Luther, Knox, etc. do) creeds (which we, original Protestants, uphold) matching them to the Word of God. Hall writes, "sola Scriptura has never meant that the only resource the Christian needs to understand God's Word well, are the Bible and the Holy Spirit. The ideal of the autonomous interpreter can more easily be laid at the steps of the Enlightenment than the Reformation."

The book goes into more detail and is very well written for anyone to read.

David says

This is a helpful book for pastors, or those interested in the subject, that shows how the early church fathers interpreted scripture. There are chapters on the Greek fathers of the east and the Latin fathers of the west, as well as chapters on the differing methods of Antioch and Alexandria. I think this book is helpful because the fathers come to us from a different culture with different presuppositions and assumptions which means they may see things in scripture we miss. Learning from our forefathers in the Christian community is vital. Of course, they are not infallible, but they may help us see where our own culture has blinded us and we are mistaken. This book is a pretty easy read and will benefit any pastor.

Chad Duke says

It is a fantastic book with great insight and commentary. All Christians should read this book to understand firmly the foundation of our faith.

Timothy says

Christopher Hall provides an easy entrance into the world of the Church Fathers. He samples portions of the Four Doctors of the East: Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil the Great and John Chrysostom; as well as the Four Doctors of the West: Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory the Great.

In his opening chapter entitled "Why Read the Fathers?" Hall references the idea that many of us 21st century Christians have an absence of memory. He quotes Robert Wilken, "many modern theologians and Christian laypeople find themselves rootless and drifting in a barren secular and ecclesiastical landscape, largely because they have forgotten their Christian past."

Reading about the Fathers and reading portions of the Fathers was refreshing. A bridge began to be constructed from my modern mind back into history before modernity had taken precedence. Modernity has, I think we can agree, tempered our approach to God and the reading of Scripture. The Fathers challenge my modern beliefs.

Toward the end of the book Hall compares modernity with the ancients. "Unlike most modern people, including too many Christians, the fathers are in no rush. You will not find them providing ten easy steps for spiritual fulfillment, nor evincing great sympathy for those who might find their writings difficult to grasp for the first time. The problem and realities Scripture addresses and elucidates - sin, evil, death, life, incarnation, redemption, creation, recreation - demand the attention of a mind and heart that has learned to be patient, to listen, to be silent, to study, "with the mind of the heart."

I think this is a book that would be good reading for anyone exploring their Christian roots. Perhaps it will encourage you to go to one of the father's works and read. That would be a good thing. Blessings!

Nick Jordan says

Highly recommended if the title intrigues you or if you just want a first book to start to enter historical theology. I have a very difficult time believing there is a better book out there to introduce the idea of reading with the fathers, especially at this trim 200 pages. It's not perfect, of course, but I think my wish for additional dialogue with other traditions (Hall is an Episcopalian) could only be fulfilled if this book were a whole lot longer.

Aaron Lockhart says

An excellent book that acquaints one not only with some of the Church Fathers, but with their exegetical practices as well. An excellent read.

This quote sums up the book and its importance:

"How can we hope to understand the Bible if we needlessly cut ourselves off from our own community's reflection and history? We need one another and each other's insights, past and present, if we are to understand the Bible."

Jorge Bessa says

It's an elementary revisit to one of the most important contribution of the Church Fathers – reading and understanding the Bible. It shows us how the church used to understand and respond to the Word of God. The book is very good, but do not explore the richness of such a great subject.

Jim B says

A companion volume to the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Extremely interesting introduction to the early Western and Eastern church fathers, their approach to interpreting Scripture and their theology. The recurring theme is that Scripture can only be interpreted by believers - one must be spiritually prepared to see the meaning of Scripture. Belief in divine inspiration included that the Old Testament reveals Christ (to a far greater extent than modern Christians accept). Even allegory tended to express that faith.

Hall makes the point that the allegorization of Scripture saved a generation of Christians with Greek backgrounds who were offended by the bloodiness of the Old Testament.

Church fathers covered:

Eastern Fathers - Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil the Great and John Chrysostom.

Western Fathers - Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine and Gregory the Great. Origen gets fair treatment.

Father Michael Porter says

Good intro to some of the early church fathers, including Origen. It also lays out, in a pretty clear way, the differences between the Antiochian and Alexandrian schools of scriptural thought. I had to read it for school, but am glad that I did. I would recommend it to anyone looking for a good introduction to this topic.
