

READING THE BIBLE WITH OLD FRIENDS: THE VALUE OF PATRISTIC BIBLE INTERPRETATIONS FOR MINISTRY¹

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In Ian Fair's ministry of encouraging and equipping church leaders, he emphasizes the need to utilize their interpersonal relationships as resources for leadership: "leadership is a matter of developing relationships with others . . .," he suggests.² Throughout his manual on congregational leadership, Fair emphasizes the importance of participatory strategies. Collaborative church leadership involves many factors, but at one level it prompts the wise leader to seek the counsel of others, aware that the collegial interchange of ideas deepens insight and seasons knowledge. Good conversations between people of faith stimulate growth in maturity. Although Professor Fair's advice is undoubtedly concerned mainly with conversations between living persons, perhaps it is not inappropriate to suggest that even those who have "fallen asleep" can make good dialogue partners. It is becoming increasingly recognized today that church leaders of the past can become a rich resource in the present, contributing to our personal growth and ministries.

For example, one of the most interesting recent developments in biblical studies has been the appearance of exegetical aids drawing principally upon the work of the church fathers—most notably the IVP series, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (ACCS)*.³ The success of the *ACCS* has been marked. Not only have the volumes sold well in English-speaking environments, but the

¹ This article originated as a paper delivered at the Sermon Seminar of the Institute for Christian Studies (now Austin Graduate School of Theology) in Austin, Texas, 26 May 1999. I am grateful to that gathering of ministers for helpful feedback and encouragement.

² Ian Fair, *Leadership in the Kingdom: Sensitive Strategies for the Church in a Changing World* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1996), 127.

³ Thomas Oden, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press). To date, nine volumes have appeared, covering various parts of the OT and NT. Hereinafter referred to as *ACCS*.

global demand for works of this kind has necessitated the commissioning of translations of the series into other languages: Russian, Spanish, Italian, and Arabic, to date. Church leaders reared within the Restoration heritage may well wonder who the so-called church fathers are and why it is that contemporary Bible students would be interested in making their acquaintance. After all, contemporary culture is basically convinced that new is better. Whether in the sphere of commercial mass-marketing or in the seemingly unrelated realm of graduate theological education, only the most current discoveries and latest developments merit much attention, it seems. Yet the growing popularity of antiquarian Bible study tools such as the *ACCS* suggests that today's interpreters can find inspiration and insight, not only in the latest commentaries, but also in the oldest ones.⁴ This article surveys the benefits for Christian leaders of approaching the Fathers as colleagues in Bible study, both for personal spiritual growth and for help in reading and proclaiming the text. I conclude by offering some remarks about the *ACCS* in particular and about the use of these tools in general.

Naming the Fathers

The designation "father" shows up early in Christianity to indicate an influential leader or teacher; the Apostle Paul uses the term this way about himself (1 Cor 4:15). In time, "church fathers"⁵ came to denote that body of ancient Christian thinkers and leaders who lived after the time of the apostles and who wrote significant works that many Christians over the years have found to be useful.⁶ These works include doctrinal treatises, letters, commentaries,

⁴ Thomas Oden attempts to explain the current fascination with traditional sources of theological reflection by relating the story of his own faith pilgrimage in an interview in *Christianity Today* (Christopher A. Hall, "Back to the Fathers," *Christianity Today* [September 24, 1990]: 28–31). The call for modern evangelical Christians to reappropriate the spiritual foundations of early Christianity is being sounded with increasing frequency (e.g., see Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999]; and D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999]).

⁵ Increasingly, theologians and historians have seen the need to think in terms of Fathers and Mothers, not Fathers only. An impressive number of women have made significant impacts on Christian history, thought, and practice over the centuries. However, the overwhelming majority of Christian texts to survive from the first millennium derive from male hands. Hence, the consensus of scholarship, while appreciating the need to draw attention to the role of women, nevertheless finds the designation "Fathers" to be appropriate when referring to the group of people responsible for these texts.

⁶ See Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (New York: Paulist, 1994), 4–7, for a list of general criteria by which people have come to be known as Fathers: (1) antiquity, (2) holiness of life, (3) orthodox teaching, and (4) ecclesiastical approval (i.e.,

sermons, prayers, and poetry. Together they form a sort of theological-literary “canon,” akin in function to the canon that English literature professors draw on to teach their students. As a whole, this canon represents the “best of the best” in ancient pious reflection. It does not rank alongside Scripture but has proven to be a useful study companion for those of any era who care to contemplate similar subjects. For the East, names such as John Chrysostom, Clement of Alexandria, Ephrem the Syrian, Athanasius, Eusebius of Caesarea, and John of Damascus come to mind; for the Latin-speaking West, Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Jerome, Hilary of Poitiers, and many others. The study of these people and their writings is known as the field of patristics, from the Greek for “father” (*pativr*). Though no precise terminus exist, the patristic era is generally considered to begin after the time of the apostles and to extend until about the eighth century, with most Fathers having lived in the second to sixth centuries.

For many Christians who read the Fathers today, the issue is not one of authority but of community. They read the Fathers in order to expand their circle of dialogue partners. They are fully aware that they will not agree with everyone who speaks up in this conversation, nor do they feel obliged to do so. After all, it is not necessary that two people agree in every respect in order to share a beneficial relationship. Sometimes a difference of opinion makes the conversation conducive to personal growth. Yet as it turns out, fans of the Fathers are often drawn to them initially because they have found among them genuine colleagues with whom they share a kinship of faith, attitudes, and pastoral mission. It is not without reason that the Fathers’ works have been long considered the benchmark Christian classics.

The Need for Classics

The Fathers are Christian classics, and it is as such that they retain great value. Classics set standards by which to measure new and divergent strands of thought. Though sometimes the conserving force of the classic delays needed innovation and is therefore an unwelcome hindrance, most often the classic protects us from impulsive craziness. We live in an age of rapidly multiplying media and are subjected to a vastly expanding cacophony of voices. How does the Christian sort through the mountains of contemporary books and other resources? What criteria will we use to judge whether a new thing is good and true to the basic Christian faith—or flawed and imbalanced in some hazardous or immature direction? Popularity? Feel-good factor? Currency? What is needed is a cultivation of basic Christian “taste,” the faculty of discernment acquired through regular exposure to the long-proven classics of Christian thought and spirituality, an instinct coached and refined by the masters. For the classics keep before us the basic contours of sound Christian belief and practice; they help us

general acceptance).

recognize recent imitations of older trends, good or bad; they put the whims of the moment into perspective; they give us eyes to see the hidden implications of contemporary messages. One day, a few of the books published this decade may become enduring classics in their own right, but we are too close to them to see their quality clearly without corrective lenses. Becoming acquainted with the proven classics gives us the deep vision we need to recognize a classic in the making.

The Christian classics also help us distinguish core issues from peripheral ones. Reading through the Fathers, one notices that some of them obsess over matters that seem insignificant to us. These issues vary according to time, place, and situation. It might be a disagreement about the correct dating of Easter, a controversy about whether a slave should be allowed to become bishop, or a problem concerning the right understanding of the millennium in Revelation 20. The people embroiled in such discussions took them seriously, assigning high stakes to the outcomes. It would be easy for us to dismiss their little obsessions as bizarre curiosities—if they did not remind us so poignantly that obsessing over peripheral matters has never gone out of fashion in the church. We have our own quirks, but we may be too close to them to recognize them for what they are.

This is where the Fathers can help us again. In their writings we not only find local, pet issues of a minor character, but we find that some issues show up over and over again. We may also notice that these matters tend to coincide with the weightier matters of Scripture, that the notes most commonly sounded in the Christian heritage correspond to those notes that occur most frequently or deeply in the Bible also—core issues of lasting importance, topics to be discussed deeply in every age, items of faith and practice and attitude without which Christianity does not survive as such. Attending to the harmony refines our ears so that we become all the more attuned to the foundational themes in Scripture and all the more discerning in our ability to distinguish core issues from peripheral ones. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) reminds us of the centrality of love; John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407) pricks our consciences regarding our care of the poor; the mystagogical preaching of Ambrose of Milan (ca. 339–97) draws us to contemplate the universal significance of such ancient Christian rituals as baptism and the Lord’s Supper; the christological debates of the third to eighth centuries underscore the fact that one’s contemplation of the meaning of Jesus Christ is indeed “of first importance” (1 Cor 15:3).

Each of us brings assumptions and experiences to the biblical text as we strive to interpret it; some of that baggage hinders good reading, whereas some of it equips us as good readers. As I hope to show in the following discussion, by consulting the Fathers’ exegeses, we add to our baggage the potentially stabilizing weight of spiritual classics.

Colleagues from Another World

The Fathers walked the earth centuries ago. Upon first encounter, their world and their logic are so different as to seem off-putting and even irrelevant. The gap between them and us materializes instantly when we study their interpretations of Scripture. For example, whence does Tertullian (ca. 160–220) get the idea that in the Gospels the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus in the form of a dove because the dove is a bird without any gall, a creature of “utter simplicity and innocence” and therefore appropriate to the Spirit?⁷ Surely the Gospel text itself does not require this biological association. More generally, some of the Fathers use allegorical reading strategies that strike modern interpreters as bizarre and dangerously out of control.

Admittedly, we will often stumble across passages that strike a familiar chord. When Basil of Caesarea (330–79) meditates on the Holy Spirit, insisting that to appreciate the Spirit we must “refute the objections brought forward in the name of so-called science,”⁸ we children of modernity feel a certain kinship with him. Also, for people like us who have been tutored on the notion that the Reformation was the first high note in the history of Christian theology after the Apostle Paul, it is heart-warming to read the likes of Ambrosiaster (late fourth century) or Chrysostom and discover that the rhetoric of salvation by grace through faith long predates Luther’s time and had not been forgotten after Paul.⁹ Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) displays a great respect for the contributions of women in his explanation of Eve’s creation as the only suitable partner for man.¹⁰ Resonant passages such as these occur frequently, yet often the discrepancies between the Fathers and us loom larger than any commonalities. When Gregory of Nyssa (331–ca. 395) elaborates on the “three-fold unity” of human body, soul, and spirit, his explanation is complex and hardly reflects any modern psychological understanding of human nature.¹¹

On the other hand, precisely because Gregory’s anthropology reflects the metaphysics of the time, his comments here may be useful. Though a great distance separates us from the Fathers, an even greater distance separates us from the writers of Scripture. The Fathers may seem foreign to us, but they are closer to the biblical world than we are, occasionally providing helpful insight into that foreign realm. Jerome (ca. 347–419) knew Hebrew and lived in Palestine for a while, whereas Chrysostom was well acquainted with native Aramaic speakers. These Fathers’ remarks about the Semitic terms in Scripture, the geography of Palestine, Jewish traditions, and their general grasp of the

⁷ ACCS 2.13.

⁸ M. F. Toal, ed., *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers: A Manual of Preaching, Spiritual Reading and Meditation* (4 vols.; Chicago: Regnery, 1955–63), 3.9. Hereinafter referred to as *SSGF*.

⁹ ACCS 6.31–32.

¹⁰ ACCS, *Old Testament* 1.69.

¹¹ ACCS 2.173.

culture can give us fresh perspectives on details in the biblical text.¹² To take another example, today's interpreters are often perplexed by Paul's manner of quoting OT Scripture. Yet in his comments on Paul's treatment of Ps 68:18 in Eph 4:8, Jerome helps acclimatize us to Paul's thought by showing us that the apostle's methods of adapting Scripture were not as foreign in Jerome's world as they are in our own.¹³ Chrysostom offers a clue as to why the older women mentioned in Titus 2:3 might merit a particular warning against excessive alcohol consumption by pointing out that older women in that culture were prone to drink in order to keep themselves warm.¹⁴ It is also noteworthy that he is happy to take the reference to "women" in 1 Tim 3:11 as pertaining to "deaconesses" and that he seems familiar with that role.¹⁵

Of course, not all the historical, linguistic, and geographical understandings of the Fathers are correct or helpful. A modern audience may not be convinced by Basil's explanation of the science of thunder in connection with the naming of *Boanerges* (though they are bound to find his depiction of the Gospel's explosive properties stimulating).¹⁶ The Fathers tend to be more naïve than we are about science and historical developments, and they do not approach fantastic traditions with the same skepticism that is our birthright. In some respects, we have a better understanding of the first-century world than a fifth-century writer might, due, for example, to modern archaeological finds and critical scientific methods. Patristic explanations of such things as Apollos's origins (Chrysostom thought he was one of the one hundred twenty¹⁷) or of the Apostle Thomas's alleged mission to India are perhaps legendary and should be weighed carefully against the known facts, scarce though they be. Nevertheless, the strangeness of the Fathers stands as a warning that the world of Scripture must itself be stranger and more challenging than our persistent attempts to domesticate the Bible allow.

Often at just the points where the Fathers make us most uncomfortable, they force us to deal with something in the biblical text that we might otherwise have overlooked. This is well illustrated by one feature of patristic thought that

¹² E. g., see Jerome's linguistic treatment of the place and personal names in Paul's "allegorical" reading of Hagar and Sarah (*ACCS* 8.69), his explication of the *corban* tradition (*ACCS* 2.98), and his and Chrysostom's treatments of the term *raca* (*SSGF* 3.230)—at the very least, Chrysostom observes, it is impolite to call someone "empty" who has the Holy Spirit within!

¹³ See *ACCS* 8.165.

¹⁴ Johanna Manley, ed., *The Bible and the Holy Fathers: Daily Scripture Readings and Commentary* (Menlo Park, Calif.: Monastery Books, 1990), 589. Hereinafter referred to as *BHF*.

¹⁵ *BHF* 544.

¹⁶ *ACCS* 2.41–42.

¹⁷ *BHF* 107.

usually strikes contemporary American Christians as odd: an irrepressible ascetic tendency. The great majority of Fathers (and Mothers) adopted lifestyles of radical self-denial, prizing the life of consecrated singleness, minimizing personal ownership of possessions, and practicing extreme spiritual disciplines, such as celibacy and prolonged fasting. These baffling tendencies fly in the face of contemporary values so that we struggle to comprehend them. Surely God created the world for us to enjoy. Moreover, much evangelical rhetoric leaves no doubt that in the minds of many Christians today, being part of a happy and fulfilled nuclear family may be God's highest calling. How, then, do we explain this ancient ascetic bent?

To be sure, ancient asceticism is a complex phenomenon, involving many factors and finding varied expression, so that no thorough explanation is possible here. It is instructive, however, to read the commentaries and sermons of these ascetically-minded ancient Christians and realize that they needed to search no further than Scripture for ample justification. Some of the OT prophets, John the Baptist, the Apostle Paul, and Jesus himself provide ready ascetic models. Ancient exegetes find no shortage of helpful passages, meditating on Jesus' suggestion that the disciple will have no place to lay his head (Matt 8:20), taking seriously Jesus' call to leave home and family (Mark 1:17–18; Luke 14:26–27) so that the disciple may voluntarily bear the cross of daily struggle with a minimum of worldly attachment (Matt 10:9–10). They appreciate Luke's version of the beatitudes, for example, "blessed are the *poor*," plain and simple (Luke 6:20–22). In anticipation of their future "angelic" lives, they choose to make themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom (Matt 19:12; 22:30), following Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 7 and emulating the devoted status of the widows' office from 1 Timothy 5. Surveying their honest, literal reading of these biblical texts does not leave us puzzled as to the source of their asceticism so much as it leaves us to ponder the powerful set of values in our own society that has tended to blind us to this major biblical style of spirituality. The Fathers prompt us to wonder whether churches today might benefit from a more balanced, biblical theology of consecrated singleness—both for those who may live as singles and for those who are not yet married but find no consolation or help in the church's typical presumption that real Christianity begins with marriage and family.¹⁸

Another area in which the Fathers' ascetic strangeness illuminates our own distance from Scripture involves the handling of possessions. To people who find themselves growing comfortable with the affluent privileges of American culture, the Fathers' persistent focus on Scripture's criticisms of materialism is strikingly uncomfortable. Commenting on the Rich Fool of Luke's Gospel, Basil

¹⁸ See Beth Phillips's plea to recover a biblical expression of devoted singleness in "1 Cor 7 and Singleness in the Church," *Leaven* 9 (2001): 123–28. Phillips draws her inspiration from the ancient ascetics' plain application of Scripture to their lives.

remarks, “Do not imagine that everything has been provided for your own stomach. Take decisions regarding your property as though it belonged to another.”¹⁹ Philoxenus of Mabbug (ca. 440–520) expresses a core patristic value when he writes, “faith’s only possession is God, and it refuses to own anything else besides Him. Faith sets no store by possessions of any kind, apart from God, its one lasting possession.”²⁰ Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 200–258) reminds us of the biblical redemptiveness of generosity: “When we have pity on the poor, we are lending to God at interest.”²¹ In the same vein, Salvian (ca. 400–ca. 480) offers good advice: “there is no compelling necessity for you to store up large earthly treasures for your children,”²² though he certainly has something else in mind for those treasures besides the self-indulgent consumption of the children’s inheritance. We may find comfort reading Clement of Alexandria (ca. 160–215), who acknowledges that the heart is more important than possessions in determining one’s quality of faith, so that the piety of the humble rich may outdo that of the arrogant poor.²³ Even so, the perspective of Caesarius of Arles (469–542) chastens us: “While there is much in the world to love, it is best loved in relation to the one who made it.”²⁴ The Fathers force us to face Scripture’s indictment of worldliness head-on.

Another feature of the Fathers’ strangeness that can renew our reading of Scripture is their corporate bias. Like the writers of Scripture, they lean towards communal understandings of the faith. Chrysostom illustrates this well. Discussing the divisions mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1, he argues that the problem at Corinth is not that there were many groups, each on its own and “entire within itself,” but that the One has ceased to exist in that community of believers. At its root, church division is bad because of what it means with reference to Christ, not to us.²⁵ In Chrysostom’s understanding of Ephesians 4, the Holy Spirit came not for the sake of individual indwellings, but as the divine substratum of Christian community: “the purpose for which the Spirit was given was to bring into unity all who remain separated by different ethnic and cultural

¹⁹ Edith Barnecut, ed., *Journey with the Fathers: Commentaries on the Sunday Gospels. Years A, B, and C* (3 vols.; Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1992–94), *Year C*, 105. Hereinafter referred to as *JWF*.

²⁰ *JWF*, *Year C*, 131.

²¹ *BHF* 533.

²² *ACCS* 2.146.

²³ Clement of Alexandria, *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (eds. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson; Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 2.592–604.

²⁴ *ACCS* 2.114; cf. *ACCS* 2.145.

²⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homily 3 on 1 Corinthians*, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (ed. P. Schaff et al.; New York: Christian Literature, 1894; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), series 1, 12.10.

divisions: young and old, rich and poor, women and men.”²⁶ The Fathers put us back in touch with the communal bias of Scripture against our own individualistic assumptions.

Given a voice, the Fathers’ readings of Scripture challenge many contemporary trends in our society and in our churches, thereby refreshing our outlook on the text. Although today’s readers will often disagree with the Fathers, these inevitable clashes of ideas and positions do not disqualify the Fathers from our consideration. In fact, the opposite is true. In his introduction to Athanasius’s *Incarnation of the Word*, C. S. Lewis invites us to welcome moments of disagreement with classic texts as growth opportunities:

Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books. . . . They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction.²⁷

The Fathers may appear peculiar to us, but their odd features can coalesce into a perspective on Scripture that powerfully challenges our own social norms and enriches our interpretive assumptions. In this way, these strangers are our friends.

Embracing a Spiritual Kinship

Though these ancients do not have the benefit of our modern scientific, historical-critical worldview, neither do they suffer under its materialist and humanistic limitations. Their premodern viewpoint is therefore not just a source of provocative discomfort for us; it is undoubtedly also one of the reasons that many Christians today find them comforting. The experience of typical graduate students is illustrative. When students begin graduate theological study, they are bound to be delighted with the opportunity to take faithful reflection to a higher level—engaging the best theological minds in print and in person, submitting to the discipline of philosophical and scientific rigor. Unfortunately, they often discover that many of the most highly acclaimed scholars in biblical studies may be lacking certain characteristics that they as students naively supposed to be prerequisite to the field—such as faith, personal spirituality, investment in a faith community, or involvement in genuine pastoral care. Some of the scholars they read exhibit no faith at all; others appear to have faith but have chosen to pursue methods of reading Scripture that bracket out faith questions and any notion of divine operation, perhaps in favor of the materialistic assumptions of

²⁶ ACCS 8.159.

²⁷ C. S. Lewis, “On the Reading of Old Books,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (ed. Walter Hooper; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 202.

the social sciences. Biblical studies is rich with immensely helpful tomes that aid in the careful historical-literary interpretation of the text but lack the integrative thinking that reveals a heart burdened with the mission of connecting to church contexts. The problem of integration falls to the students on their own or perhaps to those who specialize in application, for example, preaching instructors and leadership gurus, or writers of pop-Christian texts.

The danger here is in over-generalization. There are many exceptions to the above characterization of academe; in any case, the scholarship it represents is of great value, ranking alongside that of any age. Nor is the need for specialization likely to abate soon. The point is not to denigrate modern scholarship, but to diagnose a trend: it should not be surprising to us that the average Christian or even the Master of Divinity can come to be disillusioned with the gains of modern scholarship, yet find the Fathers deeply refreshing. In the Fathers, the person of faith may detect kindred spirits. Here are some of the most highly trained, reasoned, and articulate minds of their age, yet their reading of Scripture is “from faith unto faith,” for the sake of community. It not only begins in the matrix of personal spirituality but has the aim of shaping piety and of addressing pastoral issues in communal settings. For the Fathers generally, there is no methodological gain from segregating their reading of the biblical text from the pressing concerns of worship, church conflict, the spiritual growth of new converts, and the life of prayer. In their discussions of biblical texts, they move from exegesis to pastoral care to theology to cultural critique in ways that may seem illogical in light of the fragmented specialization of modern methods and critical outlooks.

Students of the Fathers’ exegeses welcome the integration, feeling a natural kinship with their forebears in several areas. First, not only do the Fathers allow faith as a legitimate starting point for study, they consider it a necessity. Trust in God and a heart inclined to follow his ways are prerequisites to good reading. Along with philological tools and philosophical training, good Bible students must cultivate spiritual disciplines. “In order to study the scriptures and understand them correctly, an honorable life, purity of soul, and Christlike virtue are needed,” contends Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 300–373).²⁸ Ephrem embraces Bible study as a kind of worship, an encounter with the divine Word incarnate on the page. He cautions against the arrogant “prying” of some who forcefully assert their clever intellects upon the text. Our human minds are limited; we ought to be grateful for any revelation we receive, not proud at having acquired it. Meditating upon the creation narrative in the opening chapters of Genesis, Ephrem says:

I took my way stand halfway

²⁸ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 57 (trans. A. Robertson, *Library of Christian Classics* 3; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954).

between awe and love;
 A yearning for Paradise invited me to explore it,
 but awe at its majesty restrained me from my search.
 With wisdom, however,
 I reconciled the two;
 I revered what lay hidden
 and meditated on what was revealed.
 The aim of my search was to gain profit,
 the aim of my silence was to find succor.²⁹

In the Fathers' understanding, hours spent in Bible study and sermon preparation represent a spiritual discipline, a season of worship, to be approached with appreciation and proper humility. Study should be an occasion for praise and thanksgiving. This may mean admitting ignorance occasionally. In regard to the perplexing phrase of Rom 11:26 that "all Israel will be saved," Origen (ca. 185–ca.251) bluntly concedes that only God and the Son know what it means—and perhaps a few of their friends.³⁰ Though not always consistent in their humility toward each other, the Fathers universally assume that faith and a humble attitude toward God always accompany good Bible reading.

Second, their faith orientation naturally leads them to value the application of the text to real life. They habitually move from exegesis to implementation. Indeed, in their way of thinking, praxis connects to faith as another prerequisite for good reading. Philoxenus accuses people who read the text without doing the good works prescribed therein of being like corpses, incapable of hearing even the blast of trumpets.³¹ Augustine points out that "knowing" without "loving" is a demonic trait.³² Contemplating the text's practical application is not too pedestrian for these brilliant exegetes; on the contrary, this is their highest aim and ambition. Nor do they consider themselves exempt from the censure of Scripture. Some of their harshest criticism is aimed at their own roles. Jerome applies the submission language of Eph 5:21 to leaders first of all: "In the church, leaders are servants."³³ Origen speculates that all selfish desire to lead would evaporate if people took seriously Scripture's call for leaders to judge themselves more severely than they judge others.³⁴ Christians must read the text for the purpose of applying it, and good application begins with the readers themselves.

²⁹ Ephrem Syrus, *Hymns on Paradise* 1.2 (trans. Sebastian Brock, *Saint Ephrem. Hymns on Paradise*; Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990).

³⁰ *ACCS* 6.298.

³¹ *JWF*, *Year A*, 94.

³² *ACCS* 2.22.

³³ *ACCS* 8.194.

³⁴ *ACCS* 6.54.

Third, as pastoral caregivers, the Fathers are concerned about the welfare of their people. Not all the Fathers were monks, secluded behind stone walls or in caves. It is tempting to imagine them as the unrealistic protohippies of Late Antiquity, but most of them were preachers, deacons, Bible teachers, and church leaders, deeply involved in the lives of their fellow Christians and in the day-to-day affairs of church work. In this, their hope was to imitate Jesus, the “all-sufficient physician of humanity,” according to Clement of Alexandria’s comments on Jesus’ healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1–12)—a healer of the whole person. The Fathers seek to do the same by their sharply challenging interpretations and preaching. For example, in an age of compromise and half-hearted commitment, Augustine draws a sober lesson from the woman who touched the hem of Jesus’ garment (Mark 5:25–34): “Few are they who by faith touch him; multitudes are they who throng about him.”³⁵ Reflecting on certain Gospel passages, Radbertus reminds his readers that a Christian of any status should feel compelled to act as a servant: “otherwise, if he refuses to learn the master’s lesson, far from being a master himself, he will not even be a disciple.”³⁶ Isaac of Nineveh (late seventh century) advises us to be frank about the problem areas of sin in our lives, without taking refuge in our other virtues, however laudable they may be: “If you owe God a small coin over some matter, He is not going to accept from you a pearl in its place.”³⁷

Though the Fathers may be stern moralists, their sensitivity and compassionate pastoral instincts can be inspiring as well. In his enduring classic on ministry, the *Pastoral Rule*, Gregory counsels ministers to represent the message of Scripture confidently, but he warns that their effectiveness will depend largely on the integrity of their own example—and on their ability to accommodate the message of the text to the needs of their people.³⁸ After all, the reason God allowed the great Apostle Peter to be frightened by the weak voice of a maidservant when he denied knowing Jesus was so that Peter “might learn through his own fall to have compassion on others.”³⁹ Sin is no trifle, but one Syriac author explicates the story about the sinful woman anointing Jesus’ feet by calling the listener to “reflect within yourself that your sin is great, but that it is blasphemy against God and damage to yourself to despair of his forgiveness because your sin seems to you to be too great.”⁴⁰ By contrast, Theophan the

³⁵ ACCS 2.75.

³⁶ JWF, Year A, 139.

³⁷ Trans. Sebastian Brock, *The Wisdom of Saint Isaac the Syrian* (Fairacres, Oxfordshire, U.K.: SLG, 1997), 2.

³⁸ See *Pastoral Rule*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. 12.

³⁹ ACCS 2.222.

⁴⁰ JWF, Year C, 91.

Recluse (1815–1894)⁴¹ sounds like an uncompromising legalist when he insists, “it is necessary only to do everything according to the commandments of God,” until he takes up the obvious question, “Just what exactly? Nothing in particular—only those things which present themselves in the circumstances of life, . . . [in] the every day happenings we all encounter.”⁴² Discipleship is a lofty calling of radical commitment, but it is also a mere matter of everyday living. Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) recommends that we be patient and not too quick to judge one another, drawing a lesson from Jesus’ parable of the tares (Matt 13:24–30). We should be patient with tares in the church because some of them will change heart and become wheat, or perhaps have children who will be wheat. The disciple should simply focus on being wheat!⁴³

The Fathers’ impulse to identify with the people they shepherd drives good ministry. For all their great faith, they are not unacquainted with the struggles, doubts, and frustrations common to the Christian experience. Augustine comments on the man who cries, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24) with comforting words: “Where faith fails, prayer perishes. For who prays for that in which he does not believe? . . . yet let us pray that this same faith by which we pray may not falter.”⁴⁴ Prayer requires faith, yet we obtain faith through prayer. Doubt is understandable. Its healing antidote is the spiritual discipline of prayer, even in the face of the heart’s uncertainty.

A fourth point of connection with the Fathers emerges when we recognize them as fellow strugglers in the business of Bible interpretation. The Fathers wrestle with texts, trying to understand, expound, and apply God’s word. Today’s Bible readers find in the Fathers ready companions on this journey and sources of creative stimulation. For example, in regard to the problem of explaining why the Apostle’s name changes from Saul to Paul in Acts, the Fathers discuss a wider range of plausible historical, literary, and theological solutions than one is likely to find in a modern commentary.⁴⁵ How does sleeping with a prostitute defile the Christian, but the Christian wife sanctifies an unbelieving husband (1 Cor 6:15–16; 7:14)? Chrysostom contends that in marriage a fair chance exists of converting the spouse to Christianity, whereas

⁴¹ Theophan’s dates are late, although he is included in *BHF* along with certain other late spiritual writers. The Eastern churches nurtured the patristic mentality long after Christians in the West had moved on to other modes of thinking.

⁴² *BHF* 516.

⁴³ *JWF*, *Year A*, 108–9.

⁴⁴ *ACCS* 2.124.

⁴⁵ See Michael Compton, “From Saul to Paul: Patristic Interpretation of the Names of the Apostle,” in *In Dominico Eloquio—In Lordly Eloquence: Essays on Patristic Exegesis in Honor of Robert Louis Wilken* (eds. Paul M. Blowers et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 50–68.

sleeping with a prostitute is not an effective evangelistic strategy.⁴⁶ Tertullian explicates Jesus' command to "Give to Caesar's what is Caesar's" by asserting that Caesar's coin goes to him because it has his image on it, whereas we belong to God because we have his image—to which Augustine adds, "we are God's money."⁴⁷ Ephrem struggles to make sense of the bizarre scene in which Zipporah circumcises Moses' son (Exodus 4:25).⁴⁸

Patristic interpretation can stimulate and excite the interpreter as well as any modern commentary. It is intriguing to observe Chrysostom sort through possible identifications of the "man of lawlessness" in 2 Thessalonians 2,⁴⁹ weigh different understandings of Jesus' cryptic statement "Are there not twelve hours in the day?" (John 11:9),⁵⁰ or explain various ways of seeing John's use of the term "Passover" as he deals honestly with chronological problems among the Gospel accounts.⁵¹ Origen's classical rhetorical analysis of Romans 1 is astute.⁵² The remarks of Methodius (†ca. 311) about the saying "have salt in yourselves" (Mark 9:50) helpfully remind us that levitical gifts were to be seasoned with salt.⁵³ Gregory Nazianzus's (ca. 329–390) discussion of the different ways of understanding Jesus' occasional inability to do miracles shows a sophisticated grasp of language and a profound understanding of faith.⁵⁴

Like today's interpreters, the Fathers struggle to discover the significance of biblical texts. Many readers today find their approaches to this task inviting because the Fathers are naturally integrative. Even where today's readers might disagree on the interpretation of a specific passage, the Fathers' holistic methods disclose a shared kinship at a profound level.

Deeper Practical Theology and the Symbolic Exploration of Faith

The quest to plumb the deep, vibrant meanings of our faith is the duty of every generation of believers. However, deliberate contemplation aimed at deepening faith has not normally been the focus of theological reflection in Churches of Christ, which have devoted themselves usually to the functional matters of determining what God wants his people to do and how we want them to do it, plain and simple. This inclination has suited the American

⁴⁶ *BHF* 237.

⁴⁷ *ACCS* 2.167–68.

⁴⁸ *ACCS, Old Testament* 3.32.

⁴⁹ *BHF* 517–18.

⁵⁰ John Chrysostom, *Homily 62 on John* (trans. Thomas Aquinas Goggin, *Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist. Homilies 48–88; Fathers of the Church* 41; New York, 1960), 168.

⁵¹ *Homily 83 on John*, *ibid.*, 409–10.

⁵² *ACCS* 6.25.

⁵³ *ACCS* 2.133.

⁵⁴ *ACCS* 2.79–80.

frontier values of simplicity and common-sense pragmatism. As modern, practical people, Churches of Christ have tended to concentrate on the concrete, tangible dimensions of Christian faith and practice, such as church organization, morals, and worship forms. These are important dimensions, yet at its core our faith also involves dimensions that are intangible, even impractical. The present fascination with spirituality and the ongoing obsession with worship remind us that Christianity entails experiential and relational components, emotional elements, and transcendent realities.

In order to provide secure foundations of sustainable faith, it is crucial that we dive into the depths of Christian belief and explore the transcendent dimensions in our reflections and teaching. Capturing these elements, however, requires a more poetic approach to the facts of the faith, one that is artistic and imaginative, multiplying symbolic associations. For example, Paul's treatment of baptism as a participation in the experience of Christ (Romans 6) shows us that it is not enough to teach the necessity of baptism and provide instruction on its proper form. Paul goes well beyond such surface level matters to explore the rich web of associations that exist between the form and practice of baptism, the Gospel story, and Christian living. By using a language of images, symbols, and experience, he deepens our understanding of baptism and imparts a powerful vision to the imaginations out of which we live our lives. Our faith is deepened: its facts and rituals become more meaningful, more compelling, more integral to the business of everyday living in the world and in Christian community. For Paul, correct doctrine draws together the historical Gospel event, mystical union, public ritual, proper thinking, and ethical living into one coherent world.

One of the great qualities of the Fathers' meditations on Scripture is their shared inclination toward a holistic, mystical appropriation of faith—one that tenaciously clings to the hallmarks of orthodox faith and practice, yet is alive with faithful imagination, bearing the fruit of discussion on the biblical text that can be as evocative as it is descriptive. Reading patristic exegesis not only supplies dynamic stimulation for the task of deepening faith reflections, but it also attunes our minds to this feature of the apostolic mindset, which traffics in symbols and metaphors. When the NT interprets baptism through a wealth of creative symbols—a mystical participation in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6:3–10); a cleansing spiritual bath (see Mark 1:4); a Red Sea moment (1 Cor 10:2); the water saving Noah's ark (1 Pet 3:20–21); or a spiritual rebirth (John 3)—the Fathers are comfortable handling these symbolical threads.

Scripture's teachings on the Lord's Supper also supplied fertile ground for the patristic imagination to plow. The *Didache* associates the bread fragments gathered after the feeding of the five thousand with the bread broken in the

Lord's Supper, praying for the final regathering of the dispersed church.⁵⁵ Augustine reads Luke 24 through symbolical lenses, unpacking the significance of the moment of breaking bread at Emmaus as a moment of recognizing Jesus' body and connecting the idea to 1 Cor 11:29.⁵⁶ Chrysostom meditates at length on the grape of the Lord's Supper:

The grape contains within it the mystery of Christ. For as the cluster has many grapes joined by the wood of the stalk, so Christ has many faithful joined by the wood of the Cross. . . . In the grape we have a figure of patience, in that it goes through the winepress; of joy, in that the wine rejoices the heart of man; of sincerity, because it is unmixed with water; and of sweetness, in that it is delectable.⁵⁷

Ambrose, similarly, has no difficulty grasping the significance of Christ as a second Adam for the human race since he is unencumbered by the modern individualistic impulses that cause us to treat Paul's imagery as mere figure of speech. For Ambrose, as for Paul, the individual and the collective group overlap so that they are inseparable.⁵⁸ Paul's second Adam language is not merely analogy; it reflects reality, but a mystical reality that requires special means of explication. Ephrem meditates on the doctrine by explaining that in the passion of Christ a series of redemptive exchanges occurred: Adam's sweat for Jesus', the cross for the tree of Eden, the sixth day of passion week for the sixth day of creation,⁵⁹ the hands pierced with nails for hands plucking the forbidden fruit, a mouth struck with blows in exchange for the mouth that ate the fruit. Jesus' pierced feet take the place of Adam's stumbling foot, while the bitter gall Jesus drank on the cross sweetens the bitter effects of the Serpent's venom.⁶⁰

It may be argued that Ephrem's language sounds more like poetry than exegesis, but that is precisely the point. Where modern exegesis would criticize the Fathers for being unscientific or unhistorical, the Fathers would criticize modern methods of being unspiritual—of reducing the text's meaning to historical and material facts in an attempt to recreate the original, literal sense. The Fathers were convinced that the Word has power to speak to people in every age. For them, much of this power operates on a spiritual level by means of

⁵⁵ *ACCS* 2.205.

⁵⁶ *BHF* 19.

⁵⁷ *SSGF* 3.299–300.

⁵⁸ *ACCS* 6.136.

⁵⁹ Ephrem Syrus, *Hymns on the Church*, 51:8. Quoted in Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (rev. ed.; *Cistercian Studies Series* 124; Kalamazoo: Cistercian Studies Press, 1992), 33.

⁶⁰ Ephrem Syrus, *Nisibene Hymns*, 36:1. In Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit, Eighteen Poems of Saint Ephrem* (2d ed.; *Studies Supplementary to Sobornost* 4; Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1983), 40.

engaging artistry that is both the fruit of disciplined contemplation and its catalyst, not just on a cognitive level through bare description or on an imperatival level as pure command. Like good preachers of every generation, many of the Fathers understood that the transformative power of the ancient word becomes living and active in its creative adaptation as a fresh vision to capture and shape the Christian imagination. Exegesis and preaching are not distinct disciplines. Ephrem's evocative language may seem to be only an unnecessarily elaborate way of stating the fact that Jesus' death reverses the Fall—and that Christian worship and life are somehow joined to that ongoing drama—yet Ephrem's inspiration is the Apostle Paul's own evocative language. Reading Ephrem helps us experience more fully Paul's thought world. In some ways, the Fathers operate according to a worldview that is more compatible with biblical Christianity's basic convictions about spiritual realities than the prevailing modern worldview. The Fathers respect the fact that deep mysteries are best grasped through symbol and paradox and that discussions of spirituality rely on the language of art, metaphor, and experience. Reading Scripture with the Fathers alongside can sensitize Bible students to Scripture's own methods, with the result that the magnificent, faith-forming imagery of Scripture, viewed through the Fathers' perceptive lenses, could have a revitalizing impact on the language of preaching, Christian education, and worship.

Looking up Old Friends—*The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*

The purpose of the foregoing discussion has been to illustrate the benefits for the contemporary interpreter of consulting ancient commentators and preachers. To sum up, as people who are closer to biblical times, the ancients give us clues to help unravel the text's meaning. Their discussions often expand our range of options in treating a passage. Their integrative, holistic methods are friendly to faith, the practice of ministry, and the task of deepening spirituality and theological reflection. Their classic character sharpens our ability to discern quality and distinguish the essential from the marginal. The Fathers even make good devotional reading, as timely and pertinent as more contemporary material.

Unfortunately, however, in the past the Fathers' accessibility to the average reader has been limited. Some patristic works have not been available in recent English translations. Also, the corpus of patristic texts is enormous; the thought of plodding through even single works and commentaries can intimidate busy preachers pressed for time. They also need a good library that has the numerous volumes, and academic editions tend to be expensive. Furthermore, the task of sifting through many pages of densely packed material in order to find the most relevant treasures can become a burden. Reading through a patristic work in its entirety usually repays the investment, yielding serendipitous insights into the nature of God, the Christian life, and the Scriptures. However, ministers typically come to the task of theological reflection with either a text or a topic in hand and a deadline looming. They need tools respecting this pattern.

In the foregoing discussion, the patristic quotations and illustrations mostly come from a narrow range of sources that were designed with just such needs in mind. These selections were made intentionally to demonstrate the expanding body of resources now available that make the Fathers highly accessible to church leaders and lay people. One such resource is *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, a series whose growing popularity attests to its eminent usability. Produced by InterVarsity Press and overseen by series editor Thomas Oden, ACCS has commissioned a number of patristic scholars (mostly North American) to comb patristic exegetical literature and extract the most interesting and serviceable portions for inclusion in its volumes. The volumes therefore function as anthologies of patristic commentary on Scripture, in the tradition of ancient *catenae*.⁶¹ Most of the volumes will cover one or a few biblical books and, though only nine have appeared to date, the projected twenty-seven volumes will eventually comprise comments on all the books of the Bible.

The format of the volumes is handy, being structured along the lines of modern commentaries. After an introductory discussion of the contemporary relevance of patristic material, the editors explain their methods of excerpting comments, offer some guidance for using the volume, and present a discussion of critical issues. Each volume has basic bibliographical information regarding sources. The editors use existing English translations of the patristic texts wherever possible but must translate many of the texts directly from the ancient languages. The introduction is followed by the commentary proper. Having divided the biblical book into sections, the editors begin each section of the commentary by supplying the relevant passage of Scripture (RSV), followed by a brief synopsis of the patristic selections. The subsequent patristic excerpts themselves are collected into a running commentary of one or a few paragraphs each, given verbatim and keyed to biblical verses. Each includes the name of the Father excerpted (where known) and a summary heading that tells the reader at a glance the excerpt's theme. Footnotes indicate the sources of the excerpts so that users may consult their original contexts. Topical and biblical text indices enhance the volumes' usefulness.

ACCS is impressive in many ways. It makes a significant portion of the patristic heritage available in a delightfully practical (and affordable) package. By doing an immense amount of reading, sifting, excerpting, translating, and organizing, the editors have saved readers an enormous amount of time. Each volume collects some of the best material gleaned from many works (some formerly unavailable in English) into a condensed space. Its organization and contents render each volume a flexible tool: the reader may either work through

⁶¹ A catena is a "chain," consisting of brief quotations from the Fathers in a continuous string of commentary.

the commentary sequentially as a sort of devotional Bible reading companion or consult an assortment of patristic comments on specific passages. The focus of the series on patristic commentary and homily sources keeps the excerpts close to the biblical text, producing results most likely to catch the attention of those engaged in regular Bible interpretation. In an effort to incorporate as many interesting and helpful comments as possible, the series has not shied away from including influential heterodox thinkers such as Origen and Pelagius (ca. 350–ca. 425), along with lesser-known Fathers, such as Ambrosiaster and Philoxenos of Mabbug, whose comments on Scripture are important.

However, I am disappointed with *ACCS* in a number of ways. The volumes provide little information about the Fathers they quote, beyond providing names and dates. Brief biographical orientations to each Father, even just a sentence or two, would enable readers to connect more easily with them and to contextualize their contributions. The inclusion of biblical text is also problematic. The editors should make it clearer that the biblical texts the Fathers read sometimes vary from those of most modern versions—indeed they were often closer to the King James Version than to the RSV.⁶² Also, though the editors claim to be inclusive of Eastern Fathers who are less known to Western readers, the inclusion of Eastern (e.g., Syriac) interpretations is limited, with a number of rich resources left out or only sparingly consulted. The method of selection creates another problem. The series deliberately limits itself to the Fathers' exegetical writings, with some exceptions. This is understandable. Editors are able to survey only so many texts, after all, and the running commentaries of most of the patristic exegetical texts have contents that are portable into the *ACCS* format. However, many other patristic texts (e.g., doctrinal treatises, epistles) also teem with biblical citations and allusions. Naturally, a project such as this must have boundaries. Though delaying the project and increasing volume length would be unfortunate, it is also unfortunate that many rich insights into the biblical text have been systematically excluded because they do not occur in the right genre.

A final criticism is also connected to methods of excerpt selection. Not all the volume editors follow the same methods. The volume on Mark's Gospel draws from numerous ancient sources, presenting a wide selection of brief excerpts. By contrast, the Matthew volume focuses heavily on the exegeses of a handful of Fathers, presenting generally longer quotations from Augustine and Chrysostom chiefly—in spite of the fact that a greater variety of patristic commentary exists for Matthew's Gospel than for any of the other Gospels. Furthermore, the continuous presentation of Augustine and Chrysostom on Matthew is helpful, but casting a broader net would in this case have been more faithful to the breadth of the patristic tradition and the explicit aims of the

⁶² The later volumes appear to be addressing this problem more adequately; see *ACCS, Old Testament 1 (Genesis)*, xl–xlv.

series. For example, the brevity of the excerpts in the Mark volume accents in another way the difficulty of achieving balance in a project such as this: this way of presenting the Fathers creates the problem of removing passages from their contexts. The editors sometimes include a fair amount of context, enough to catch the gist of a Father's thought. Some of the Fathers' ideas, however, become clear only after reading several paragraphs; hence editors appear to have preferred selecting comments that express ideas concisely, in easily digestible chunks. The *ACCS* anthology is useful, but it cannot substitute for the patristic contexts themselves. On the plus side, one of the strengths of *ACCS* is its utility as a sort of annotated index to the Fathers' own, full texts. Users will find *ACCS* a helpful first reference before they consult the Fathers' original contexts. Yet *ACCS* is not an exhaustive compendium of patristic exegesis, but more of a generally faithful representation of the broad contours of patristic interpretation.

In spite of these problems, *ACCS* makes a unique and beneficial contribution to the commentary genre, of great value to professional exegetes, preachers, Bible teachers, or even lay persons who welcome thoughtful stimulation in their Bible reading. Eerdmans is working on a parallel multi-volume series under the editorship of Robert L. Wilken entitled *The Church's Bible*, the first volume of which has yet to appear.⁶³ Having received assurances that it will not merely replicate the work being done by Oden and InterVarsity Press, we wait to see how it will measure up to *ACCS*.

Conclusion

As Christopher Hall explains in his companion volume to *ACCS*, we all strive to be good Bible readers. The Fathers are helpful to us because they read the Bible well. This is not to say that every patristic interpretation is correct or admirable, nor that the modern interpreter will always agree with a Father's specific conclusions about a passage. It does not mean that we ought to relinquish the gains of modern interpretive approaches. The Fathers read the Bible well because they read it in church community with the aims of faithful preaching, spiritual growth, and pastoral care.⁶⁴ They approach Scripture from within a communal environment, adhering to values that resonate with the aims and tasks of contemporary ministry. I have observed that for Ian Fair the crucible and final testing ground of theological reflection, beginning with sound Bible interpretation, is the life of the Church. This essay seeks to honor that spirit by providing orientation to the use of patristic exegesis—a resource for spiritual growth and the practice of ministry that is basically compatible with

⁶³ See the notice in Blowers, *In Dominico Eloquio*, xiv.

⁶⁴ See Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 191–99.

the ideal that good theology is always done for the church, by the church, in the church. The proliferating assortment of handy tools (e.g., *ACCS*) opens a window on this valuable resource—as Theodoret (393–460) says: “In the future life we shall attain perfection. But in the present life we need all the help we can get.”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ *ACCS* 8.167.

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