

*“This is true worship: when the mind of the worshipper presents itself  
as an undefiled offering to God.”*

LACTANTIUS  
*The Divine Institutes*



*“We should consider what is said—  
not with what eloquence it is said. Nor should we look at how it tickles the ears.  
Instead, we should look at the benefits it confers upon its hearers.”*

ARNOBIUS  
*Against the Heathen*



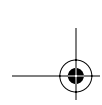
*“Every place and every time in which we entertain the idea of God is in reality sacred.”*

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA  
*The Stromata, or Miscellanies*

*“Sound doctrine does not enter into a hard and disobedient heart.”*

JUSTIN MARTYR  
*Fragments*





## O N E

# PREPARING TO LEARN THEOLOGY WITH THE CHURCH FATHERS

---

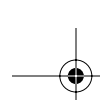


### Key Questions to Explore

*The incarnation of the Word.* The first five hundred years of the church's life were a period of intense biblical and theological ferment, reflection and development. Think of the momentous events of the first century A.D. itself. The early Christian community was birthed with the firm conviction that the God revealed to Abraham, Moses and David had acted finally and completely on humanity's behalf in Jesus Christ. In the incarnation of the divine Logos (Word), sent by the Father into the midst of this present evil age, the life of the age to come had been dramatically introduced and manifested.

"In the beginning was the Word," John writes, "and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (Jn 1:1). How could this be? What strange kind of theological arithmetic was this? How could God be God and the Word be distinct from God and yet, simultaneously, also God? Exactly what Word was this? How was the Word related to God? To further complicate matters, John writes that this Word "became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). In fact, this Son had become fully manifest in Jesus Christ, who as John puts it, "is close to the Father's heart" and has "made him known" (Jn 1:18).



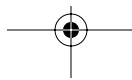


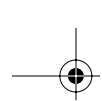
Breathtaking, mysterious and complicated statements all. Of course, John's prologue to his Gospel is only the beginning of the story. The reader soon discovers that God has uniquely visited humanity in Christ. Here we have an incarnate God, one who comes to serve, suffer, die and rise again, conquering the awful reality of sin in the process. It is a wonderful story, at first glance seemingly simple, but increasingly complicated and troublesome the more one contemplates it. How was the early church to think through and resolve the many questions that would invariably rise, some almost immediately, others as the church reflected on the gospel narrative during the crucial formative years of its history?

*The question of authority.* We have, for example, the question of authority. Why were certain documents considered authoritative for the life and thought of the church? What was the source of this authority? What separates documents such as the four canonical Gospels from other texts that attempt to tell and interpret the meaning of Jesus' life? Not only is the question of the Scripture's own inherent authority highly significant, but so also is the issue of what one is to do when Christians read the text of Scripture and interpret it differently. How can one distinguish a correct interpretation of Scripture from an incorrect one? How did the early church handle this considerable problem?

*The person and work of Christ.* Or what of the person and work of Jesus himself? We have, for instance, the question of Jesus' divinity. If Jesus was God incarnate, as New Testament writers appeared to insist, in what way was he God? Were there actually three gods: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit? Or was Jesus perhaps a lesser god, not on the same plane as the Father, but in some mysterious and ineffable manner divine nonetheless? Maybe there was only one God, but that single God possessed the marvelous ability to manifest himself in various forms or roles, occasionally as the Father and at other times as the Son or the Spirit. How was one to make sense of the complex biblical testimony regarding Jesus' divinity?

And then we have the question of Jesus' humanity. The Gospel narratives surely seemed to portray Jesus as a human being. He had a human body—or at least appeared to have one—and thus ate food, drank wine, was tired after a long day's work, slept at night, spoke a human language those around him readily understood, possessed human emotions such as joy, sadness and fear, and finally experienced death, a reality only genuine biological life can undergo.





How could one make sense of Jesus' humanity in light of his divinity? Could genuine divinity and humanity be joined together? What kind of union was this? Was such a union even possible? Perhaps Jesus possessed a human body controlled by a divine mind. Or maybe his body was not real after all. Then again, perhaps Jesus possessed a real body and a genuinely human mind but a divine will. To what extent was Jesus human after all? Perhaps he was more like an angel, a third type of personal, created being—part human, part divine.

And what did Jesus come to accomplish? Apostles such as Paul, Peter and John were absolutely insistent that Jesus' life, death and resurrection had overcome sin and its destructive effects on humanity and God's creation at large. In what way had God conquered sin in the lives of those people who believed in Jesus? Apostolic teaching indicated that Christ's crucifixion and subsequent resurrection had broken the spine of sin. How? How did human faith and belief tap into the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection? In what way was the exercise of faith related to God's power? To human freedom? How were the glorious realities of Christ's work and person communicated to those who believed in him?

*The Holy Spirit.* Perhaps the greatest surprise of all was the ascension of Christ back to heaven, just when all seemed to have been accomplished and fulfilled. Jesus left his small band of brothers and sisters behind at the very moment when they appeared to need his guidance the most. Why would he do such a thing? Clearly Christ's departure surprised his early followers.

Luke records that, after the disciples had received extended postresurrection instruction from Jesus, they asked, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Jesus' response no doubt caught them off guard: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:7-8). Whereas the early postresurrection Christian community thought the story had reached its conclusion, it was only just beginning. There was work to be done, a witness to be proclaimed, and those left behind would inaugurate that work and witness. Moreover, the early Christian generations would play a key role in witnessing to, incarnating and interpreting the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Though Christ was physically





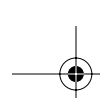
leaving, he promised the disciples that he would soon return to them through the Spirit, the Spirit who would empower them for ministry and form them into Christ's body on earth, the church.

Again, layers of questions present themselves. Who is this Holy Spirit who will infill and energize the church? How is the Holy Spirit related to Christ and to the Father? Are Father, Son and Spirit simply different manifestations of one divine being, or is the Father distinct from the Son, and the Son from the Spirit? If these distinctions exist, exactly who is the Holy Spirit? What is the Spirit's work and mission? And what of the witnessing community Jesus predicts the Spirit will form, infill, power and direct? How can the church, made up of sinful human beings, still be called by the apostle Paul Christ's "body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:23)? In short, what is the church?

As the early church pondered these questions, its thinking coalesced around central theological *loci*:

- The question of authority: To what should the church look for its guiding authority? What is the relation between Scripture and the apostolic tradition, and how do these two relate to one another in the formation of doctrine?
- The question of the Trinity: Is Christ genuinely divine? If so, how is the divinity of Christ to be understood in relationship to the Father and the Spirit?
- The question of the incarnation: What is the relationship between Christ's deity and humanity? If Jesus was truly divine, was he also truly human? How can he simultaneously be both?
- The question of Christ's work: How has Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection overcome sin and introduced the life of the age to come into this present evil age?
- The question of humanity: What is a human being? What does the Scripture mean when it states that human beings have been created in the image of God? How and to what extent has sin affected and infected human nature?
- The question of the church: What is the church? How is the church related to Christ? What is the church's task on earth? How does one enter the church? What are the church's marks? How is the life of the church nourished and strengthened? What are the dangers the church can expect to encounter in its mission and ministry on earth?
- The question of the future: What will happen in the future? When will Christ return? What is the resurrection of the dead? What will occur at the last judgment?





How shall we work through these questions in this book? In the following pages I will attempt to act as a guide to the reflections of the church fathers—bishops, pastors and, occasionally, laypeople who ministered in the church from approximately A.D. 100 to 750. Readers familiar with my earlier book, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, will already be aware of why I think the church fathers are important and neglected to our own detriment and peril. Those unfamiliar with this earlier book will perhaps find a brief introduction to the fathers and a rationale for studying their exegesis and theological reflections to be helpful.<sup>1</sup>

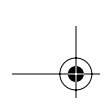
### A Brief Introduction to the Fathers

The idea of a “father in the faith” has a rich and fruitful background in the Bible and in the ancient world. Paul, for example, describes himself as a “father” to the members of the Corinthian congregation, distinguishing the role of a father from that of a mere guardian (1 Cor 4:15). The term *father* also occurred in rabbinic, Cynic and Pythagorean circles. Early Christian writers such as Clement of Rome, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria all employ the term. Irenaeus speaks, not only of the student as one “who has received the teaching from another’s mouth” as a son, but also of one’s instructor as a “father.”<sup>2</sup> A father in the faith, then, is someone who is familiar with the teachings concerning the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and can be trusted to hand on faithfully and correctly the tradition that he himself has already received. Trustworthiness of character and rootedness in the gospel are nonnegotiables in the life of a father. There were also trusted mothers in the faith, but unfortunately we do not possess a large written corpus from their hands.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of preserving and faithfully passing on the apostolic teachings concerning the meaning of Jesus is clearly evident in the era of the trinitarian and christological controversies. Bishops who faithfully preserved and protected the conciliar decisions of key councils such as Nicaea (A.D. 325), Constantinople (381) and Chalcedon (451) received the title “father.” The church considered these Christian leaders worthy of special honor and regard for preserving orthodox teaching during times marked by severe testing and occasional persecution.

Vincent of Lerins describes the fathers of the church as people who “each in his own time and place” remained “in the unity of communion and the faith” and





were “accepted as approved masters.” Vincent argues that “whatsoever these may be found to have held, with one mind and one consent . . . ought to be accounted the true and catholic doctrine of the Church, without any doubt or scruple.”<sup>4</sup>

In addition, four key criteria are often employed to determine whether a particular Christian teacher qualifies as a father of the church.

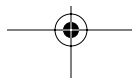
*Antiquity.* A father lived and ministered from roughly the close of the first century (ca. A.D. 96) to the time of John of Damascus (750).

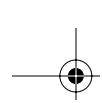
*Holiness of life.* By holiness we do not mean perfection, as though the fathers were angels in human form. Most, as I have elsewhere written, were intensely human and struggled with the same shortcomings and temptations common to humanity.

The fathers exhibited a tremendous zeal for God and the Scriptures. And, often like us, their zeal manifested itself in both their strengths and weaknesses. They have much to teach us about reverence, awe, self-sacrifice, self-awareness and self-deception, worship, respect, prayer, study and meditation. Their theological contributions remain foundational for Christians in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and many Protestant communions. . . . Most often they wore their hearts and thoughts on their sleeves. At times they were impatient, short-tempered and narrow. Some had a very hard time listening to perspectives other than those they endorsed. Yet their hearts were set on fire by the gospel. They lived and breathed the Scriptures. And many willingly laid down their lives for the sake of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

*Orthodox doctrine.* Since the fathers were teachers of the church, two key points pertain here. First, a father must have left behind a body of teaching, however small it might be. Second, this teaching must line up with apostolic tradition. That is to say, whatever a father says in his teaching must be “orthodox” or in line with what the apostles themselves taught and modeled.<sup>6</sup> Many of the topics we will explore with the fathers in this book—the Trinity, the incarnation, the absolute authority and infallibility of Scripture, the fallen condition of humanity and Christ’s redemptive death on the cross—were first affirmed and developed doctrinally by patristic exegetes. Indeed, as Boniface Ramsey notes, belief and trust in these essential, central doctrines is what precisely sets off Christian belief from other religious belief systems.<sup>7</sup>

*Ecclesiastical approval.* Finally, the church itself must identify and approve the





teachings and lives of those who would receive the designation “church father.” No one can autonomously claim the title for himself.<sup>8</sup> Some highly significant early Christian writers, such as Origen, failed to receive this designation from the church because their positions drifted beyond the bounds of orthodoxy.

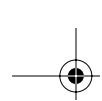
So why should we spend the time and effort to learn theology with the church fathers? For one thing, the fathers can help us to understand what it means to be a Christian and how the early stages and models of Christian worship, practice and reflection have shaped Christian perspectives and practices throughout the church’s history. The fathers were formative figures in the formulation and modeling of Christian faith and practice and can be a healthy antidote for the theological and ethical faddism and foolishness that marks too much of the modern Christian world. The fathers will insistently remind us that the content of Christian belief and its lived practice in worship, prayer and the many relationships of life must always remain one piece.

In fact, the fathers will insist that it is in the womb of worship and the experience of God’s redemptive act in Christ that theology is born, nourished and developed. Athanasius’s response to his Arian opponents, as we will shortly discover, was largely based on the Arians’ inability to make sense of Christian worship. How, Athanasius asks, can the Arians deny the full divinity of Christ and yet still worship Christ? To do so is to worship a *creature*, however highly elevated in status, as God. Surely, Athanasius will argue, something is wrong here.

Not only were the fathers key figures in the formulation of Christian faith, but they were much nearer to the apostolic writers than we are, what I have called elsewhere *hermeneutical proximity*.<sup>9</sup> This proximity in time and space does not guarantee that the fathers heard and understood the biblical writers infallibly. It does mean, however, that they often hear melodies and harmonies in the biblical narrative that modern Christians fail to discern. The fathers hear tonal qualities in the text that might well remain muted for readers of another age. If we rely solely on modern commentaries and systematic theologies, we might well overlook wisdom, patterns, concerns and models that can supplement or correct the insights offered by modern theological reflection.

No Christian’s ideas or practices have been shaped in a familial, cultural, ecclesiological or theological vacuum. Theological knowledge, awareness, practice and, occasionally, prejudice are formed within a number of contexts. Pur-





posefully and systematically moving out of these familiar boundaries, that is, taking a theological voyage to other times, places and personalities, rebukes the tendency of us all to think that we are the only people who genuinely comprehend the truth and who practice it faithfully. Exposure to foreign theological terrain can surprisingly highlight the fissures in our own theological understanding and remind us of the continuing need to listen to other voices carefully and respectfully.

However, a broadening and deepening of theological perspective, insight and sympathy is not the only happy fruit of working outside of one's home theological turf. A thorough immersion in patristic theology will continually pull us toward the center of the gospel and help to guard against the danger of transforming peripheral issues into the heart of the matter.

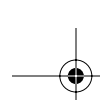
#### A Personal Reflection

I, for instance, am a Protestant evangelical theologian who presently attends a local Episcopal church. My initial intense exposure to the gospel in the late 1960s was filtered through the lens of premillennial dispensationalism, a perspective for which I am grateful in many ways but which possesses its own blind spots. As a young Christian I possessed only vague recollections from childhood that Jesus had said he would come again. However, words, phrases and symbols such as "rapture," "the great tribulation," "pretribulation," "posttribulation," "millennium," "antichrist," "beast" and "666" were entirely new to me.

Hal Lindsey, one of my first Bible teachers, interpreted apocalyptic images from Daniel and Revelation in a manner that surprised and excited me.<sup>10</sup> As Hal explained matters, Jesus could come at any time for his church. Indeed, Hal argued, the signs indicating the imminent arrival of the last times had been fulfilled when Israel regained its status as a nation in 1948. The retaking of Jerusalem in the 1967 war between Israel and its Arab enemies only further confirmed God's timetable. And this had just occurred! Soon, according to Hal's timetable, the rapture would occur, the antichrist would be revealed, the great tribulation would break out, and finally Christ would return to establish his millennial kingdom for a thousand years.

The ideas I first heard from Hal soon made their way into print in *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and publishing history was made. Hal had unexpectedly





uncovered a deep vein of eschatological and apocalyptic longing in the fundamentalist-evangelical subculture and in the American culture at large. Perhaps more important, he knew how to package the dispensational eschatology he had learned at Dallas Theological Seminary in a fashion that Americans, many of them young, countercultural types emerging from the turbulent 1960s, could understand and embrace.

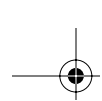
What I did not realize was that elements of Hal's premillennial perspective—minus dispensational emphases such as the distinct separation of Israel from the church in God's economy and a pretribulational rapture—represented a distinguished, though minority, view in the history of Christian exegesis. Justin Martyr, an early Christian apologist and martyr writing in the mid-second century, was convinced that Christ would soon return in triumph. This "great and terrible day" would include Christ's judgment of the entire world, his appearance in Jerusalem and the destruction of "the man of sin." Why the delay in the return of Christ? Justin argued that "the number of the just" to be included in the kingdom was yet to be completed.<sup>11</sup>

Christ's return, as understood by Justin, would result in great blessing for the saved, a beatitude to be enjoyed successively in two stages. First, believers in Jesus would possess and inhabit the land of Canaan, reigning there for one thousand years.<sup>12</sup> Second, upon the completion of the thousand years, "the general, and, to put it briefly, eternal resurrection and judgment of all will . . . take place." Other passages in Justin seem to indicate that after this second resurrection the saints would eternally possess the Holy Land.<sup>13</sup>

Significantly, Justin was convinced that the reality of Christ's coming and its attendant, severe judgments should be a spur to faithful, sober Christian living as the church waited for its Lord. Brian Daley, author of *The Hope of the Early Church*, explains that Justin's eschatology convinced him that Christians should be "marked out from the rest of pleasure-loving human society . . . by their conviction that the wicked will be punished in eternal fire, and the Christ-like just united with God, free from suffering . . . This is the reason Christians are truthful in affirming their faith . . . as well as the ground of their good citizenship . . . and their ultimate fearlessness before the threat of persecution."<sup>14</sup>

Irenaeus of Lyons, another church father writing in the late second century A.D., also represents a broadly premillennial perspective, describing a two-stage





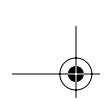
resurrection in his great work, *Against Heresies*. Stages are necessary, Irenaeus argues, because “it is fitting for the righteous first to receive the promise of the inheritance which God promised the fathers, and to reign in it, when they rise again to behold God in this creation which is renewed, and that the judgment should take place afterward.”<sup>15</sup> Daley points out that Irenaeus supports his interpretation on the basis of “many biblical passages that promise salvation to Israel in typical terms of peace, prosperity and material restoration, and he insists that these may not be allegorized away.”<sup>16</sup> Hence, the necessity of a one-thousand-year millennium (following Rev 20), followed by a general resurrection. God will cast the resurrected unbelievers into Gehenna’s eternal fire and create the habitation of the saints, “a new heaven and a new earth.”<sup>17</sup>

As a young believer birthed during the Jesus Movement, I knew nothing of Justin or Irenaeus. The model of exegesis I had received and practiced as a young Christian was a highly individualistic affair. With the help of a gifted teacher—in this case, Lindsey—and supplementary interpretive tools, I felt prepared to unlock the eschatological mysteries of Daniel and Revelation. I was shockingly unaware of the Christians who had read, pondered and interpreted these texts before me. Indeed, a crippling aspect of the Jesus Movement as a whole was its drastically shortened exegetical perspective, a theological and historical amnesia that continues to trouble sectors of the evangelical world. The idea of biblical interpretation as a communal, ecclesial function and practice never entered my mind. I am ashamed to admit that many who excitedly discussed prophetic time-tables throughout the week, myself included, were asleep in bed on Sunday mornings. We simply saw little need for the church.

Most dispensationalists saw the church as a theological surprise, the unexpected result of Israel’s rejection of the Messiah, a temporary characteristic of the interim “church age.” The church, it was believed, would be raptured before the tribulation. Then God’s salvific dealings with Israel would recommence during the tribulation. I ended up assuming, almost by osmosis, that God’s primary concern was with me and my personal salvation. The idea that my salvation was part of a larger, grander story, the formation of Christ’s body, the church—Christ’s hands and feet in history and in the future—went largely unrecognized and unexpressed.

Church fathers, whether premillennialists such as Justin or Irenaeus or amil-

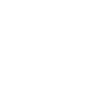
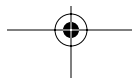


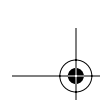


lennialists such as Augustine, at best would have been puzzled by this state of affairs, more likely horrified. Augustine, in fact, contended in his *City of God* that the premillennialism advocated by other Christian teachers too easily fed the desire for material rather than spiritual delights. He clearly felt uncomfortable, perhaps because of his immersion in Platonic philosophy, with eschatological expectations that fed a desire for pleasures rooted in the material world. In referring to “chiliasts,” the ancient forerunners of the modern premillennialists, Augustine writes:

Those people assert that those who have risen again will spend their rest in the most unrestrained material feasts, in which there will be so much to eat and drink that not only will those supplies keep within no bounds of moderation but will also exceed the limits even of incredibility. But this can only be believed by materialists; and those with spiritual interests give the name “Chiliasts” to the believers in this picture, a term which we can translate by a word derived from the equivalent Latin, “Millenarians.”<sup>18</sup>

Augustine, then, distanced himself from the premillennialism of a Justin or Irenaeus, arguing that John’s one thousand years “can be interpreted in two ways.” The first possibility was that the thousand years represented the sixth day or sixth millennium, based upon the Roman conception of history as a “cosmic week” of six ages. The second possible interpretation, one that Augustine himself seems to have more strongly supported, was that John “may have intended the thousand years to stand for the whole period of this world’s history, signifying the entirety of time by a perfect number.”<sup>19</sup> As Brian Daley summarizes Augustine’s thought, the thousand years come to represent “all the years of the Christian era.” Most significantly, Augustine comes to identify the kingdom of God with the church in the world. During this thousand years the church struggles “against the forces of evil both outside and inside her own ranks.” Augustine’s ecclesiological interpretation of Revelation 20 became the majority interpretive position, leading, as Daley puts it, to the “widespread tendency of later Latin theology to identify the Kingdom of God, at least in its first stage of existence, with the institutional Catholic church.”<sup>20</sup> Hence, while in dispensational premillennialism the church appears somewhat peripheral to God’s overarching purposes, in the development of Augustinian amillennialism the church and God’s kingdom become virtually identified.





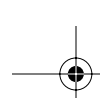
Among all the church fathers, though, whether they were the premillennialist minority or the amillennialist majority, unity reigned in the call to holiness in the light of Christ's imminent coming. John Chrysostom, for example, archbishop of Constantinople in the late fourth century, firmly believed that Jesus' return to earth was soon to take place. He identified the preaching of the gospel throughout the world as a sign of Jesus' imminent return. Chrysostom warned, however, of the dangers of an eschatological curiosity divorced from a life centered in the gospel. He reminded his listeners that their lives would end with the consummation of this age. Were they prepared to greet their Lord? Had their words and lives faithfully reflected the life of the one they so eagerly awaited? A life of Christian integrity far outweighed the value of a detailed prophecy chart. Thus he writes, "Is not the consummation of the world, for each of us, the end of his own life? Why are you concerned and worried about the common end? . . . The time of consummation took its beginning with Adam, and the end of each of our lives is an image of the consummation. One would not be wrong, then, in calling it the end of the world."<sup>21</sup>

My exposure to patristic teaching has helped me understand that the premillennial eschatological position possessed its own respected lineage in the history of the church. While certain aspects of premillennialism are more recent developments, particularly dispensational emphases, its overall perspective goes back to the second century to Justin and Irenaeus.

Patristic theology and history, however, also taught me that other distinguished fathers such as Augustine clearly believed premillennialism reflected a poor reading of Scripture. These fathers force me to listen continually to other voices that I might too quickly overlook or ignore, voices that have proven themselves over hundreds of years to be reliable guides. The benefit of listening to them will be at least threefold for modern readers.

First, interaction with these voices might actually strengthen our present perspectives and convictions. Those who advocate a premillennial eschatology can find allies in fathers such as Justin and Irenaeus. If no fathers defended a premillennial position, however, modern premillennialists would clearly be swimming upstream theologically and would have to ask themselves, what are the odds that we are the only people in the history of the church who have discovered the truth concerning Christ's second coming?



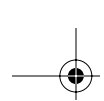


Second, learning theology with the church fathers continually rebukes the fallen human inclination toward theological and spiritual pride, an exaggerated and overblown appreciation and advocacy of what we perceive the truth to be. For instance, as we read the fathers we will quickly realize that we do not need to reinvent the wheel. We are not the first Christians to read Scripture—a surprise to no one but me on my worst days—and those who have come before us have much to offer, if only we will open ourselves to their advice and insight. In fact, I am increasingly convinced that the task of theology is the constant, nuanced, prayerful reappropriation of the heart of the Christian faith and its careful and sensitive communication to the modern world in which we live. The soundest theology will protect, preserve and effectively communicate the church's theological legacy, rather than succumbing to the temptation to create compulsively new theological models out of whole cloth. Vincent of Lerins, for instance, argues that the soundest and safest Christian reflection consists in

what you have received, not what you have thought up; a matter not of ingenuity, but of doctrine; not of private acquisition, but of public Tradition; a matter brought to you, not put forth by you, in which you must be not the author but the guardian, not the founder but the sharer, not the leader, but the follower.<sup>22</sup>

I am not arguing that there will never be progress in comprehending or communicating Christian truth, but as Thomas C. Oden puts it, "true progress is not change. True progress is an advance in understanding of that which has been fully given in the deposit of faith."<sup>23</sup>

Third, the fathers will consistently prod us to focus on the heart of the matter. They themselves were forced to pray and think through communally the meaning of the gospel, frequently in response to other teachers who were exaggerating, ignoring, distorting or undercutting important aspects of Christian truth. The doctrines of the incarnation and Trinity, for instance, were largely forged against the anvil of the teaching of Arius, a presbyter in the fourth century who believed Jesus to be a highly exalted creature. Arius's teaching forced early Christian leaders such as Athanasius to focus on the heart of the matter, and Christ's deity was affirmed at Nicaea (A.D. 325) and reaffirmed at Constantinople (381). Surprisingly, heretical teaching helps the church to clarify its own understanding of the gospel, a dynamic worthy of further exploration.



### **The Surprising Role of Heresy**

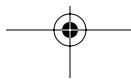
We have previously commented that error can often spur one to seek the truth. Heresy has often performed this troubling function for the church. Surely faulty teaching prodded the church to understand Christ more clearly, both in his deity and humanity.

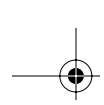
Exactly what is heresy? Tertullian, writing in the early third century A.D., argued that heresy could be identified by its divergence from apostolic teaching and doctrine. He describes a distinct paradigm of revelation and authority. First, Jesus in his earthly ministry “declared what he was, what he had been, what was the Father’s will which he was carrying out, what was the conduct he laid down for humankind: all this he declared either openly to the people or privately to the disciples.”<sup>24</sup>

Second, Tertullian explains that Jesus “chose twelve leading ones to be his close companions, appointed as leaders of the nations.” These men proceeded to plant churches throughout the Mediterranean basin and in doing so “published the same doctrine of the same faith.” These churches, founded by apostles who had in turn been selected by Jesus as his authoritative representatives and interpreters, were all part of one connected plant or vine. Indeed, Tertullian contends, newer churches “borrowed the shoot of faith and the seeds of doctrine” from those previously planted. It is this shared seed, a dissemination of common apostolic life and doctrine, that identifies a church as “apostolic, as being the offspring of apostolic churches. Every kind of thing must needs be classed with its origin. And so the churches, many and great as they are, are identical with that one primitive Church issuing from the Apostles, for thence they are all derived. So all are primitive and all apostolic, while all are one.”<sup>25</sup>

Third, Tertullian believes that only preaching and doctrine that matches apostolic teaching should be received in the church.

Now the substance of their preaching, that is, Christ’s revelation to them, must be approved, on my ruling, only through the testimony of those churches which the Apostles founded by preaching to them both *viva voce* and afterwards by their letters. If this is so, it is likewise clear that all doctrine which accords with these apostolic churches, the sources and origins of the faith, must be reckoned as truth, since it maintains without doubt what the churches received from the Apostles, the Apostles from Christ, and Christ from God. . . . We are in communion with the





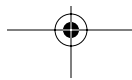
apostolic churches because there is no difference of doctrine. This is our guarantee of truth.<sup>26</sup>

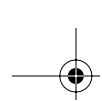
What, then, is heresy? For Tertullian at least, heresy is teaching that can be identified by its diversity and contrariety. That is, as Tertullian puts it, “it originates neither from an apostle nor from an apostolic man; for the Apostles would not have diverged from one another in doctrine; no more would the apostolic man have put out teaching at variance with that of the Apostles.”<sup>27</sup>

Irenaeus, a gifted father writing in the second century, also emphasized the importance of apostolic teaching and tradition in the propagation of the gospel and particularly stressed the important role bishops played in preserving and protecting apostolic truth. “By ‘knowledge of the truth,’ ” Irenaeus writes, “we mean the teaching of the Apostles; the order of the Church as established from the earliest times throughout the world.” Irenaeus contends that the “distinctive stamp of the Body of Christ” is “preserved through the episcopal succession: for to the bishops the Apostles committed the care of the church which is in each place, which has come down to our own time.”<sup>28</sup> Heresy can be identified, Irenaeus believes, by the willingness of the heretic to proclaim a message “that he himself has discovered by himself—or rather invented.” When the heretic is presented with the tradition derived “from the Apostles, and which is preserved in the churches by the successions of presbyters, then they oppose tradition, claiming to be wiser not only than the presbyters but even than the Apostles, and to have discovered the truth undefiled.”<sup>29</sup> Irenaeus explains that in distinction from the heretic—a theological maverick of sorts—the genuinely “talented theologian . . . will not say anything different from these beliefs (for ‘no one is above his teacher’): nor will the feeble diminish the tradition.”<sup>30</sup>

Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in the fourth century, says much the same thing in his critique of his Arian adversaries. “How,” Athanasius asks, “can they deny that this heresy is foreign, and not from our fathers? But what is not from our fathers, but has come to light in this day, how can it be but that of which the blessed Paul has foretold, that ‘in the latter times some shall depart from the sound faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils?’ ”<sup>31</sup>

Heresy, then, is the willful propagation of a position or perspective that runs





against the grain of apostolic teaching and tradition. It is frequently linked to specific personalities, precisely because at the core of heresy is often an individual's intentional choice to advocate and promote a teaching that the church has not communally received and cannot discover in or reconcile with the teaching of the apostles. Athanasius himself comments that heresy is often marked by the name of its teacher, specifically because it is that teacher's unique doctrine that sets a group apart from the church at large. Orthodox Christians, on the other hand, are marked by their refusal to link themselves with any other name than that of Christ.

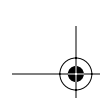
For never at any time did Christian people take their title from the bishops among them, but from the Lord, on whom we rest our faith. Thus, though the blessed Apostles have become our teachers, and have ministered the Savior's gospel, yet not from them have we our title, but from Christ we are and are named Christians. But for those who derive the faith that they profess from others, it is with good reason that they should bear [their teacher's name], for they have become his property.<sup>32</sup>

Athanasius lists various splinter groups that have adopted their leader's name: the Marcionites, Valentinians, Basilidians, Manichees, Simonians and Novatians. Such identification with a particular leader, Athanasius insists, is a flashing warning signal:

When Alexander of blessed memory [Athanasius's predecessor as bishop of Alexandria] had cast out Arius, those who remained with Alexander remained Christians; but those who went out with Arius left the Savior's name to us who were with Alexander, and as for them they were henceforward called Arians. Note that after Alexander's death those in fellowship with his successor Athanasius are instances of the same rule. None of them bears his name, nor is he named from them, but all in a similar manner and as is custom are called Christians. For though we have a succession of teachers and become their disciples, yet, because we are taught by them the things of Christ, we both are, and are called Christians all the same.<sup>33</sup>

As we will investigate in some detail in chapter two, the teaching of individuals such as Arius, ultimately deemed heretical by the church, ends up performing the positive function of forcing the church to reflect more deeply on the wonder of the incarnation. The fruit? The production of a theological model—in this





case, the Trinity—that more effectively preserves and communicates the wonder of the gospel itself.

**Is Theology Really Necessary?**

“But why,” some will ask, “is there a need for theology at all? Why can’t we simply preserve and proclaim the simplicity of the gospel?” On more than one occasion I have encountered students frustrated with the complexities of the Trinity or the hypostatic union who asked me, “Why do we need to bother with this? Isn’t the gospel really more simple? After all, even a child can understand Jesus’ message. All theology does is unnecessarily complicate matters and create an intellectual elite. It’s a recipe for spiritual pride and deception. Can we skip it altogether and get back to the message of Christ?”

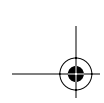
These are fair questions all, and it is a comfort to me to know that the fathers themselves occasionally felt these same tensions and frustrations. Hilary of Poitiers, for instance, demonstrates a similar longing for the simplicity of the gospel in his treatise on the Trinity. He almost wistfully recalls the simplicity of the baptismal formula in Jesus’ commandment to the disciples in Matthew 28:19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Hilary comments: “What element in the mystery of man’s salvation is not included in those words? What is forgotten, what left in darkness?”<sup>34</sup> Why, Hilary asks, must we tread the more difficult and complex path of theological reflection?

Such a difficult endeavor would not be necessary, Hilary responds, were it not for those teachers who distort the message of the gospel, undercutting the very truths that make the simple proclamation possible. Hence, there will always be the need to explain, clarify and protect the basic message of the gospel. As Hilary explains,

We must strain the poor resources of our language to express thoughts too great for words. The error of others compels us to err in daring to embody in human terms truths which ought to be hidden in the silent veneration of the heart.

For there have risen many who have given to the plain words of holy Writ some arbitrary interpretation of their own, instead of its true and only sense. . . . Heresy lies in the sense assigned, not in the word written; the guilt is that of the expositor, not of the text. . . . Since, therefore, they cannot make any change in the facts





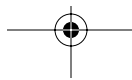
recorded, they bring novel principles and theories of man's device to bear upon them. . . . We must set a limit to their license of interpretation. Since their malice, inspired by [the Adversary's] cunning, empties the doctrine of its meaning, while it retains the Names which convey the truth, we must emphasize the truth which those Names convey.<sup>35</sup>

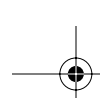
Hilary urges us, then, not to abandon the need for theological clarity in a misguided longing for simplicity. It is best to acknowledge from the beginning the tendency of us all to err in our understanding of the gospel and of the need to study carefully the questions, struggles and responses of the church as it worshiped, read Scripture and clarified its understanding of the gospel in light of the errors it encountered through the years.

How can we best learn theology with the church fathers in a book such as this? Various possibilities and strategies present themselves for consideration. We might divide the book topically, discussing chapter by chapter subjects such as the Trinity, the incarnation and the atonement and drawing on the broad patristic corpus in our discussion. Such an approach would no doubt cover a broad terrain, but it runs the risk of sacrificing depth for breadth. That is, we might discover what a wide range of fathers thought about a given theological topic but never get to know individual fathers or works well. In addition, books already exist that excellently introduce patristic figures and theology in such a topical, survey form.<sup>36</sup>

A second approach would be to focus on many of the same doctrinal topics, but by looking in depth at the thoughts of two or three key fathers. That is, rather than covering the incarnation or the Trinity by casting a net across seven hundred years of patristic reflection, one can offer a *theological sampler* of sorts. In short, spending an evening in deep conversation with Athanasius or Cyril of Alexandria on the incarnation might well supplement the riches we can gain by a wider overview. By doing so, the reader will become acquainted with a father in some depth, with the additional benefit of accompanying that same father as he explores and explains a key subject. While in *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* I focused on the eight great doctors of the church, in this volume I will cast a wider net. Ante-Nicene fathers such as Justin and Irenaeus will appear alongside post-Nicene luminaries such as Augustine and Chrysostom.

Finally, readers should realize from the very beginning that I have no interest in presenting my own thoughts to you in the present volume. Rather, my goal is





to act as a guide, hopefully presenting the reflections of key church fathers on central Christian doctrines in such a way that you will desire to get to know the fathers' reflections and lives even more intimately. As for the topics covered, we will attempt to center on the doctrinal heart of the Christian faith. Peripheral issues will remain just that, peripheral.

How will I identify the heart of the matter doctrinally? The best route is simply to follow the outline offered by the great creeds of the church. The roadmap presented, for example, by the Nicene Creed will keep us from wandering off the main highway on to less important side streets. And how does the creed begin?

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.<sup>37</sup>

Immediately the creed focuses our attention on God the Father, God the Son and the eternal relationship between the two. Why? Why the insistence on "one God" and "one Lord"? And what of the emphasis that the Son is "begotten, not made"? How can the Son be "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God," and Christians still claim to worship only one God? Is Christ indeed God incarnate? How could this be? Clearly the question of Christ and his relationship with the Father is of utmost significance for the Christian, whether one is young in the faith or long in the tooth. The question of Christ will not go away. How might the fathers help us to answer it?

