

WORSHIPING

WITH THE

CHURCH

FATHERS

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INTRODUCTION

Over ten years have passed since I began work on the four-volume set *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers, Learning Theology with the Church Fathers, Worshiping with the Church Fathers* and *Living Ethically with the Church Fathers*. Originally, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* was to stand alone as an introductory text on patristic hermeneutics designed to aid subscribers to the patristic commentary series, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, published by InterVarsity Press.

Once I had finished writing *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, though, it became clear to me that there were still vast areas of patristic thought and practice that I had not addressed, especially in three areas: theology, worship and ethics. *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* had a very specific goal: to introduce pastors and lay people unfamiliar with the ancient church to patristic biblical interpretation. I said little in this volume concerning the fathers' theological explorations and insights. Nor did I address the fathers' rich prayer life and deep perspectives and practices regarding worship itself. And so in the second volume in this series, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*, I presented the fathers' thoughts on key theological foci: the Trinity, Christ, the church, providence, resurrection and so on.

In this present volume—what I had thought would be the last volume in

the series—I turn my attention to a third great patristic interest and emphasis, prayer and worship. I had originally thought to title this book *Praying with the Church Fathers*. The more I and the editors at InterVarsity Press reflected on the title, the more we became convinced that my original thoughts on the book's title were too constrictive. Yes, the fathers prayed deeply and continually and have left us a number of key treatises on prayer, some of which we will examine carefully in the initial chapters of this book. Yet Origen—in this case representing the fathers well—teaches that all life offered to God is prayer and worship.

If so, ethics is an integral aspect of worship. When wealthy Christians perceive their material prosperity as a gift given to them to be used on behalf of the poor, this offering is prayer and worship. When an early Christian refused to sacrifice to the emperor and suffered martyrdom as a result, a genuine act of worship occurred. Since all of life can be offered as worship, it shouldn't surprise us that the fathers' reflection on ethical issues such as abortion, marriage and the family, and military service flows from their daily, habitual grounding in prayer and worship. For the fathers, ethics and worship are an integrated whole. Anthony Bloom, representing well an Orthodox perspective rooted in the teaching of the church fathers, speaks of the importance of a life "turned in the same direction as your prayer. . . . A prayer makes sense only if it is lived. Unless they are 'lived,' unless life and prayer become completely interwoven, prayers become a sort of polite madrigal which you offer to God at moments when you are giving time to Him."¹

The sacraments themselves are the backbone of worship; here I am especially thinking of the great initiatory rite of the church—baptism—and the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper. In both the church offers rich worship to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And so prayer, worship, ethics and the sacraments form an integrated whole, one that I thought could be well represented in one volume. Yet as I researched and wrote, I increasingly realized that the attempt to include all these aspects of the church's rich spiritual heritage in one book would place too great a burden on the reader (and writer!). And so the need for a fourth volume became clear, one in which the ethical perspectives of the fathers could be treated clearly and thoroughly.

In this third volume, then, we will focus specifically on baptism, the Eucharist, prayer and the spirituality of the desert fathers. The church fathers thoughts and practice on a wide variety of ethical issues—war, abortion and family life come to mind—will follow in the fourth volume.

The years I have spent under the tutelage of the church fathers have been for me a time of intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth. My evangelical roots, first planted during the Jesus Movement of the late sixties and early seventies, have been nourished by the fathers' perspectives. The Jesus Movement, for instance, had no ecclesiology. In many ways, Jesus freaks like me, though we loved Jesus himself, were highly suspicious of the church and authority in general, whether institutional or individual.

I have learned from the fathers that the church is much broader and deeper than I had ever imagined. My individualistic, evangelical bent has been tempered by a historical, theological and spiritual lengthening of memory. My listening skills have been enhanced. Voices that once seemed strange, foreign and occasionally distorted—sometimes because of the historical, cultural, ecclesial and linguistic distances separating them from me—are now old friends. This is not to say that I always find myself in agreement with the fathers. We still have our disagreements, but our quarrels now resemble family squabbles and in-house arguments.

I invite you too into an active, lively engagement with the church fathers, and in this particular volume, with their understanding of worship. For some evangelicals—perhaps many—the fathers' beliefs and practices concerning prayer, baptism and the Eucharist will be foreign and even jarring. The church fathers view life sacramentally, while many evangelicals have found and worshiped Christ in a nonsacramental tradition. Hence, the idea that God uses tangible, earthy means such as wine, bread and water to communicate blessing and nourish fellowship will strike some readers as far-fetched, implausible, superstitious and a misreading of Scripture that has warped the church's tradition.

In this book I have tried to present the fathers' perspectives and practices on worship faithfully, clearly and accessibly. And, much more than in the first two books of this series, I have shared my own life experiences with the reader, not to focus attention on myself but to show how a patristic world-

view can offer twenty-first-century Christians insight and guidance as we continue in the unexpected, mysterious period between Christ's first and second comings.

I have attempted to present as clearly as possible the fathers' understanding of what worship is and what it isn't. I have tried to allow them to speak for themselves, to present their case and then to encourage readers to make their own decisions as to the validity of particular patristic viewpoints.

Reading ancient texts is tricky business. Readers should keep in mind specific obstacles that may hinder our effective and discerning entrance into the world of the fathers. First, of course, we have the historical, cultural, linguistic, ecclesial and theological perspectives the fathers bring to their understanding and practice of worship. We live in a vastly different world from that of the fathers and must do everything possible to enter theirs openly and fairly; an awareness and acknowledgement of our own cultural, ecclesial and theological background and presuppositions can be quite helpful at this juncture.

Who, for instance, has taught us about God? Who have been the significant voices that have shaped our understanding of Scripture and, more particularly, worship? How have we learned to pray? What do we do, how do we speak, when we pray? What are the practices we engage in as we worship? How do we use our minds? Our bodies? Why do we believe that our own specific set of perspectives and practices reflects the teaching of Christ and the apostles?

Further, are there either *personal* or *perceptual* obstacles that may prevent us from listening to the fathers well? M. Robert Mulholland Jr. refers to a number of personal obstacles that can block an effective reading and appropriation of biblical truth. I believe these obstacles can also hinder our entrance into the world of the fathers: these roadblocks include specific areas of resistance to God, damaged emotions, "unholy habits of thought and action," specific and "deep-seated rebellions against God," inner darkness and "the false structures of the ego-self."²

Both the Bible and the writings of the fathers are loving, astringent texts; these texts lovingly teach us, encourage us, rebuke us and cleanse us. "Cleansing love can be astringent to our precious uncleanness. Liberating

love can be painful to our familiar brokenness. Transforming love can be deadly to the whole false structure of the ego-self," as Mulholland puts it. Ancient Christian texts, because they often approach the human dilemma from a Christian perspective different from our own modern and postmodern views, possess a power to crack us open like nuts. They pop us open "at those points of our being where we tend to be closed, where we protect the false ego from the death which is inevitable if we are to become whole persons in the image of Christ."³ It is highly probable that we will be most likely to react against the fathers at those very places where they are infiltrating the cracks in our personalities.

Personal obstacles are often linked to perceptual obstacles, roadblocks Mulholland describes as

deeply ingrained, usually unconscious patterns and structures of interaction with the world which hinder our encounter with God in reading scripture [or the church fathers]. Our culture has nurtured us in a way of knowing which militates against an openness to God in reading scripture. We have come to perceive the world as an object out there to be grasped, controlled, and manipulated for our own purposes. When we read, the text tends to become an object for us to grasp with our mind, bring under the cognitive and affective control of our intellect and emotions, and then use to enhance our structuring of events, situations, people, and even ourselves to suit our own agenda.⁴

It is our agenda that the Bible and the church fathers will often challenge directly.

I must mention two other obstacles that may block or hinder our entrance into the fathers' teaching and modeling concerning worship: *aesthetic resistance* to a text and *negative listening*.⁵ For example, we may dislike allegory and view with suspicion and distrust an allegorical approach to the biblical text. As a result of our suspicion and distrust, we "lose sight of the truth being conveyed. . . . We may remain spectators, not really involved spiritually and personally in the text and its meaning to us. We remain connoisseurs with no real personal involvement."⁶

Beware of negative listening—ignoring all that is said positively in a text and drawing our attention to what is not said and what we think should be said.⁷ The combination of aesthetic resistance and negative listening is a lethal one; either or both undercut our ability to enter empathetically into another's world. Rather than listening attentively and openly to a text, we distance ourselves from a text and create a critical buffer between ourselves and the message the text offers. It is likely, then, that it is at those very points in this book where readers find themselves vigorously disagreeing with the fathers that readers need to listen most carefully. This is not to say we shouldn't disagree with a theological position that makes little sense to us. It is to say, though, that we must first have listened carefully to the text, entering willingly into its rhyme and reason, before we have the right to disagree.

Now to the specifics of *Worshipping with the Church Fathers*: a roadmap of sorts may be helpful to readers as they make their way through the text. In chapter one I explain in some detail what a sacrament is and then discuss baptism, the great initiatory sacrament for the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican wings of the church. Chapter two focuses on a second great sacrament, the Eucharist.

The heart of the book—chapters three through six—centers on prayer itself. In these chapters I discuss a number of key themes and questions that appear in patristic discussions of prayer:

- ✦ the nature of prayer
- ✦ the problem of self-deception
- ✦ praying the Psalms
- ✦ the problem of distractions in prayer
- ✦ the foundations of prayer
- ✦ the problem the passions pose for prayer
- ✦ four key elements of prayer: supplication, intercession, thanksgiving and confession
- ✦ fiery prayer

- imageless, wordless prayer
- the problem of unanswered prayer
- unceasing or continuous prayer
- common roadblocks to prayer
- fixed times for prayer
- the Lord's Prayer

Worshipping with the Church Fathers finishes with two chapters on the spirituality of the desert fathers and mothers. Here we take a close look at Athanasius's biography of Antony and also at the wise, enigmatic sayings that emerged from the desert monastic communities. I realize that few, if any, readers of this book are monks. Yet I am convinced that aspects of the wisdom of the desert are applicable—even healing—for busy Christians living in the twenty-first century.

My prayer for this book, as for others in this series, is that pastors, priests and lay people may be nourished as they become familiar with brothers and sisters in Christ who for too long have been distant family members at best.

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