



Early Christian Readings of Genesis One: Patristic Exegesis and Literal Interpretation

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“Navigating the first chapter of Genesis, especially in light of present-day controversies, is tricky business. Craig Allert’s presentation of early Christian readings of this text will help readers to understand ancient perspectives and their applicability to present concerns.”

— **Christopher A. Hall**, distinguished professor of theology emeritus at Eastern University, and president of Renovaré USA

The Church Fathers Aren’t a Quick Fix

Several years ago I was invited to give a presentation to an adult Sunday school class at a Mennonite church in my community. I called the presentation “Back to the Sources: An Introduction to the Great Thinkers of the Early Church” and was excited to share my passion for the church fathers with this audience. Unfortunately, my hearers did not share my excitement. At best they could not understand why we would need anything other than what we have in our Bibles. At worst, they could not understand why a good conservative Christian would recommend these figures from a church and an age that was, in their opinion, far from the purity of New Testament Christianity.

Granted, my experience above may be unique, but I doubt it. An argument could be made that the necessity of an introductory chapter in this book about the importance of the church fathers is a symptom of a greater problem within our churches that my experience illustrates. For reasons beyond the scope of this book, our own Christian heritage, which includes the church fathers, has been deemed, at best, marginally helpful for the twenty-first-century Christian. At worst, the history between the apostles and the Reformers has been judged as an era best left in the past because of its perceived distance from “true” Christianity. For many Christians the idea that we should appeal to the church fathers, who belong to that era, as part of our own Christian heritage is foreign, suspect, or even impious. The Christianity of that age has been seen as transitory, naive, and even problematic, and therefore an unnecessary resource for Christian faithfulness today. After all, wasn’t it this kind of Christianity that the Protestant Reformers opposed?

One important reason why some Protestants fail to recognize the connection we have with the unfolding story of the people of God in the early church is because of what D. H. Williams calls a “fall paradigm.” In this understanding, at some point after the apostolic age the church “fell” from its pure existence, and from this fallen condition the Roman Catholic Church emerged. This understanding renders the leaders, creeds and councils, and holy days of the ancient church suspect because they were either complicit in or products of this fall. It was not until the Reformation in the sixteenth century that true (New Testament) Christianity was rediscovered and “restored and set on its originally intended course.”

To many Protestants this is not merely a paradigm, but reality. Yet for most it is implicitly assumed rather than explicitly affirmed. In *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism*, Williams argues persuasively that this way of interpreting history has its own history determined by certain motivations that gave rise to it in the first place. There may be better ways of looking at Christianity’s history that can have corrective value for the fall paradigm. The fall paradigm automatically creates a barrier between the church today and our heritage because it assumes that we developed independently of, and even in spite of, the early post-apostolic church.

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There are many reasons why the fall paradigm fails to convince some people of its viability. First, it is an overly simplistic way of reading history. History tends to be messy, and a reading that simply categorizes into good and bad runs the risk of oversimplification and overgeneralization. Second, it does not accurately represent what many of the sixteenth-century Reformers believed about the ancient church and the Fathers. Many from within Protestantism itself are seeking to remind its adherents that the Reformers actually relied extensively on the sources of early Christianity because they saw themselves in continuity with the church fathers and the historic teaching of the church. Reformation scholar David Steinmetz argues that the Reformers were very concerned that their teachings should match those of the Fathers. Steinmetz notes that they “turned to the Fathers because they found them important sources of insight into the text of Scripture.” The third, and perhaps most significant, problem with the fall paradigm is that it robs present-day Christians of their own heritage.

Calls for a recovery of the church fathers for the life of the church *today* have been underway within evangelicalism for many years now. Doctrine that we call orthodox, as well as the Bible to which we appeal for this essential doctrine, has deep roots in the mediating work of Christians after the apostles. Much of our understanding of what the Bible teaches has come to us through the church fathers.

In a culture of instant gratification, it will require discipline not to think of the church fathers as another quick fix to the things that ail the church or as icing on top of the creation science cake. But this is my point in commending the Fathers to evangelicals today. The Fathers offer us a window into an age where some of the most foundational Christian ideas, doctrines, and practices were discovered and developed. The cure for our amnesia is not ignoring them.

—Adapted from chapter one, “Who Are the Church Fathers, and Why Should I Care?”