Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers

Christopher A. Hall

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E-mail: mail@ivpress.com

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To Deb, Nathan, Nathalie and Joshua

As Oden studied patristic thought he increasingly realized that theology could be, indeed, must be done in the context of the worshiping community of the church, a fellowship that stretched across a vast expanse of years, cultures and languages. Yet Oden discerned themes and practices that remained constant in the church's life and reflection, a central "consensual" understanding of God's entrance into history in Jesus Christ. In the community of the church and its accumulated history and tradition Oden found a corrective to his tendency to idealize the "new" as inherently superior. The call to listen superseded the need to innovate.

> Then while reading Nemesius something clicked. I realized that I must listen intently, actively, without reservation. Listen in such a way that my whole life depended upon hearing. Listen in such a way that I could see telescopically beyond my modern myopia, to break through the walls of my modern prison, and actually hear voices from the past with different assumptions entirely about the world and time and human culture. Only then in my forties did I begin to become a theologian. Up to that time I had been teaching theology without having sufficiently met the patristic mentors who could teach me theology.[13]

Oden had experienced a "redirection," "a hermeneutical reversal" in which he "learned to listen to premodern texts." Oden came to understand that hermeneutics could not be severed from character, disposition and obedience, a patristic emphasis we will explore in future pages. Listening to a text and obedience to a text became for Oden "the most important single lesson I have learned hermeneutically. . . . Carl Rogers taught me to trust my experience. The ancient Christian writers taught me to trust that Scripture and tradition would transmute my experience."[14]

Oden's journey from modern theology to "paleo-orthodoxy" is remarkable. A number of other theologians and biblical scholars, many of them relatively young, are moving in the same direction. Why this swelling group of "young fogeys," as Oden calls them? Why have many become dissatisfied with modern ways of reading and interpreting Scripture? Only a closer look at how modern Christians read the Bible can answer these important questions.

Two

The Modern Mind & Biblical Interpretation

In a telling article in The Reformed Journal, William J. Abraham comments, "Any consensus in theology today begins with the rejection of the classical Christian tradition as this is generally known in Western Culture."[1]

Abraham particularly observes the strongly reductionistic flavor of much modern theology, a scientific reductionism he relates to the acceptance by modern theologians of the "canons of science" and "critical history" as normative criteria. Will the biblical narrative of God's saving work fit within reductionist boundaries? Not well, Abraham fears. Once theologians begin writing within the reductionist framework, they have little choice but to "reinterpret the tradition in terms that will speak, as they say, 'meaningfully' to the modern age."[2]

Abraham also describes and analyzes other characteristics of the modern worldview. A modern person is "one informed by the canons of rationality developed in the European Enlightenment." For some, Enlightenment rationality leads to a rejection of the possibility of special

divine revelation and belief in miracles, largely because the possibility of divine intervention in history is no longer considered a valid option.

The unfortunate result is the isolation of the secularized person and theologian, "no longer shaped in any profound way by the institutions of Christianity but . . . cut loose and alone in a sea of individualism and autonomy."[3] In effect, Abraham argues, many modern theologians have endorsed secular values "as more Christian than those of the traditional believer and . . . seek to join the secular person in his or her quest for authenticity, community, peace, and justice." The result is theology that looks suspiciously like a reworking and expansion of the politics and ethics of the Enlightenment.[4]

Interestingly, Abraham's recommendations for regaining and maintaining theological health in the modern world focus on issues of character formation. That is, spiritually ill theologians produce sick theology. How can they get well?

For one thing, Abraham recommends a cultivation of the virtue of humility. Modern theologians have been tempted by their own hubris to think they can achieve more than is reasonably or humbly possible. A more humble and self-aware approach, Abraham advises, would cultivate "a sense of inadequacy in the face of the utter complexity and mystery of the divine order." Modern theology, however, has too often failed to acknowledge "the limitation of the human intellect in its attempts to unravel the mystery of God's action in the world." The modern theologian needs to be reminded that

> a true and truly Christian theology will surely be deeply rooted in revelation and tradition, in worship and prayer in the Christian community, in compassion and service in the world, in fear and trembling before the wonder of the Christian gospel, and in humble dependence on the grace and agency of the Holy Spirit. Yet precisely these notes are the ones missing from the prevailing canons of theological discourse.[5]

Revelation, worship and tradition are the "fundamental womb" in which theology is conceived, develops and flourishes. Yet ironically, too many seminaries have deserted these sources in a misguided attempt to communicate the gospel more effectively to their surrounding culture. As a sad result many seminary graduates feel compelled to construct their own theology out of whole cloth. Abraham acerbically describes the ludicrous

expectation on many seminary campuses "that each theological student must, in the space of a semester or so and after a short period of study, develop his or her own creed and shortly thereafter be licensed to inflict this creed on the church at large."[6]

Tracy, Wilken, Oden and Abraham agree that the Enlightenment has significantly influenced how modern theologians go about their business and how modern Christians tend to read the Bible. Most, if not all, Western theologians—whether they be conservative or liberal—are children of the Enlightenment. Some, such as Tracy, welcome this family heritage, while Wilken, Oden and Abraham are much more guarded in their response to this development. If we are to understand how the church fathers read Scripture and to effectively enter their world, it is particularly important for us to examine carefully our own modern Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment background.

Positively, many Enlightenment thinkers, horrified and repulsed by years of religious warfare, championed religious toleration, freedom of conscience, the expansion of political liberty, democratic principles and philosophy, legal reform and humane punishment. Peter Gay rightly reminds us that Enlightenment leaders were in the forefront of expanding freedom on a number of important fronts: "freedom from arbitrary power, freedom of speech, freedom of trade, freedom to realize one's talents, freedom of aesthetic response . . ."[7]

Less positive was the drift among many of the Enlightenment's leading lights to question increasingly the coherence, significance and moral stance of Christian doctrine and authority. Stubborn adherence to theological and ecclesiastical tradition and perspective always ended, it seemed to many, with someone getting tried, tortured or killed.

This is not to say that the majority of Enlightenment thinkers immediately deserted belief in God. Voltaire argued that belief in God was a necessary support for a rational, moral life for all but the most advanced philosophers. "I want my attorney, my tailor, my servants, even my wife to believe in God, and I think that then I shall be robbed and cuckolded less often."[8] And yet the theology underpinning the religious belief advocated by Voltaire and others was a drastically pared down faith; fine theological distinctions and ecclesiastical dogmas would continue to be subjected to the grid of Enlightenment rationality and viewed with ever increasing suspicion.

Not only the behavior but the proliferation of Christian groups, each with their own doctrinal or cultural distinctives, seemed to undercut the plausibility of understanding Christian truth as a comprehensive, logically coherent whole. Voltaire gently pokes fun at such an idea.

> I know to be sure that the Church is infallible; but is it the Greek Church, or the Latin Church, or the Church of England, or that of Denmark and of Sweden, or that of the proud city of Neuchatel, or that of the primitives called Quakers, or that of the Anabaptists, or that of the Moravians? The Turkish Church has its points, too, but they say that the Chinese Church is much more ancient.[9]

Was it not more honest to admit that the horrors of the past one hundred years were the result of religious pride and a colossal loss of intellectual nerve, an unwillingness to embrace the possibilities human reason itself offered? Foggy thinking, it appeared, led directly to injustice. Voltaire had seen firsthand the horrific results of unbridled religious zeal. He warned, "Once your faith . . . persuades you to believe what your intelligence declares to be absurd, beware lest you likewise sacrifice your reason in the conduct of your life."[10]

Religious bloodletting and tyranny, however, were not the only factors raising doubt in the value of the church's heritage and authority. Key developments in science, mathematics and philosophy indicated that human reason was capable of astounding feats. The work of Bacon, Galileo, Descartes, Newton and Kepler opened up new vistas for the Western mind. Unrecognized and unexpected worlds appeared overnight and begged for exploration. For too long religious superstition and oppressive tradition had shackled reason and stifled its potential."[11]

For many, the principle of reason promised to free Europe from its religiously troubled past. Perhaps, on the basis of reason itself, humanity could delineate a way of thinking and living religiously that could avoid past mistakes and open up new horizons for the future. Freeing the mind from past superstitions and restraints could only facilitate this process. Possibilities seemed endless for the autonomous, reasoning individual.

The initial optimism that Enlightenment rationality and Christian faith were reconcilable, indeed allies, proved difficult to maintain. Some interpreters, such as Richard Tarnas, posit an inherent incongruence between the Enlightenment model of the universe as a mechanism with its own "mechanical forces, its material heavens, and its planetary Earth,"

and "traditional" Christian cosmology. How long would thinkers perceive the Earth and humanity as the center of God's purposes if the Sun and Earth were perceived "as merely two bodies among countless others moving through a boundless neutral void"?[12] Even a deeply committed Christian thinker such as Pascal appeared to shiver before the dimensions and implications of the new universe. "I am terrified by the eternal silence of these infinite spaces."[13]

With the increasing incongruity of the Enlightenment and Christian worldviews, would God long remain a necessary hypothesis in a world where human reason possessed the necessary keys to unlock life's deepest mysteries? As the years passed a palpable drift away from classical Christian orthodoxy rippled through Western culture.

For the first time in its long history European culture freed itself from its Christian parentage. While Enlightenment thinkers increasingly discounted the claims of revealed religion as reliable sources of truth and guidance, natural religion—founded upon universal principles and laws available to all people through the exercise of reason—promised to be a rich resource of insight for a new world breaking free from its past. "What was truly important had been written by the Creator in the great book of nature left open for all to read."[14]

Some attempted to retain Christianity as the most reliable interpreter of nature's religion. For many the Enlightenment's deep skepticism regarding the possibility of a supernaturally revealed interpretation in an authoritative text undercut the openness of the universe to God's intervention. Before long many Western thinkers bred on Enlightenment presuppositions would comprehend the world as a closed system of cause and effect, with little room left for God to operate. As Clark Pinnock observes, "The conception of a unified world, everywhere subject to the inexorable sequence of natural causes and effects, became the dominant mentality. The biblical history of salvation could only be regarded as myth."[15]

With astonishing speed, the progeny of early Enlightenment thinkers were soon to cast aside the necessity of a Christian framework for interpreting reality. Atheism became a widely accepted philosophical option for the first time in Western history. Ludwig Feuerbach interpreted God as the projection of humanity's deepest hopes and concerns. Karl Marx portrayed religious belief as a narcotic designed to sedate the proletariat

from rebelling against the injustices of the moneyed upper classes. Freud linked religious belief to deep inner neuroses in the human psyche, a reflection of an infantile search for security and unwillingness to mature. And Nietzsche, a philosopher whose system wore too heavily on his own psyche, clearly perceived that in a godless world all values become relative and truth merely a linguistic and cultural convention.

Post-Enlightenment theology demonstrates repeatedly that it is tone-deaf to divine wavelengths beyond those resonating from general or natural revelation. As Pinnock puts it, the "extreme this-worldliness" of modern theology is "unnerving." Within its self-imposed perimeters the setting of human life shifts away from its context within God's purposes to an environment of meaninglessness, to nothing more ultimate than the ever-changing and relative arrangements of the human enterprise itself. Moderns now want to see themselves as creators of their own destinies, to live lives in no way undergirded by God or directed by any sacred rules but set within the realm of blind matter running its heedless course. What is real for such people are the profane, contingent, and blind causes that produced them and the artifacts and social institutions they have created for themselves. Life begins with birth and ends with death—there is literally no other meaning than the meaning they create for themselves.[16]

In retrospect, the philosophical and theological optimism of the Enlightenment shocks our sensibilities. Yes, certain Enlightenment principles have led to significant political reforms and technological advances. What is most striking and troubling in the Enlightenment perspective, though, is its naive confidence that reason operates autonomously, largely free from the effects of personal disposition, social context, cultural background and religious community. Not only does postmodern philosophy and hermeneutics challenge this assertion, but classical Christianity doubts its fundamental viability.

A primary dictum of the Western theological tradition, channeled through the conduit of Augustine and Anselm, had been that faith led to understanding. This was a faith in Christ grounded in personal self-awareness of sin and cognizant of the continual lure to self-deception, rooted in the intrinsic authority of Scripture and the divinely inspired revelation it communicated, and nurtured by the church's history of reflection on the meaning of God's word to humanity.

The Enlightenment perspective stood this approach on its head. Understanding would lead to a mature faith, rather than the reverse. Hence, those aspects of the Christian tradition that failed to meet the standards of human reason—liberated, autonomous reason—were regarded with suspicion and for many ultimately discarded. Is it surprising that the resurrection, incarnation, Trinity, miracles and other revelatory gifts soon became negotiables?

While one might hope that conservative Christians had escaped from the Enlightenment's crippling theological methodology, evangelical hermeneutics, particularly in the United States, has been particularly shaped by certain key Enlightenment presuppositions. Mark Noll, for example, has chronicled the attempt of conservative evangelical scholars to interpret the Bible by means of key Enlightenment categories.[17] Evangelical scholars assented to the Enlightenment's deep suspicion of tradition and proceeded to produce a traditionless hermeneutic. The "Bible alone" survived the Enlightenment assault against tradition, but only by becoming a timeless text filled with facts to be scientifically identified, analyzed and categorized.

To use Noll's words, "the 'Bible alone' (in both senses of the term—as the *supreme* religious authority but also as the *only* hereditary authority) survived the assault on tradition that characterized the era."[18] As Nathan Hatch observes, the Bible "very easily became . . . 'a book dropped from the skies for all sorts of men to use in their own way.'"[19]

Noll explains that conservative Christians widely expected that as they exercised their renewed reason under the guidance of the Holy Spirit they could both understand the Bible and restore the church to its New Testament purity. The church's history of exegesis, its tradition of reading the Bible since the founding of the initial Christian community in Jerusalem, now became an enemy to be avoided if one was to read the Bible correctly and safely. Alexander Campbell, a leading light in the Restorationist movement, set the tone for many others: "I have endeavored to read the Scriptures as though no one had read them before me."[20]

The Enlightenment's imprint left its mark as many evangelicals treated the Bible as a scientific text to be inductively studied through renewed reason alone. "The Scriptures admit of being studied and expounded upon the principles of the inductive method," James S. Lamar wrote in 1859 in his *Organon of Scripture; or, The Inductive Method of Biblical Interpretation,*

"and . . . when thus interpreted they speak to us in a voice as certain and unmistakable as the language of nature heard in the experiments and observations of science."[21]

Noll contends that Lewis Sperry Chafer, one of the great founding lights of Dallas Theological Seminary, clearly based his own dispensational approach to the Bible and systematic theology on this seemingly scientific approach to reading Scripture well.

> Systematic Theology is the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting, and defending of *all* facts from any and every source concerning God and His work. . . . The student of the Scriptures . . . will discover that God's great time-periods, characterized as they are by specific divine purposes, fall into a well-defined order. . . . God's program is as important to the theologian as the blueprint to the builder or the chart to the mariner. . . . Theology, as a science, has neglected this great field of revelation [typology]. . . . Contemplation of the doctrine of human conduct belongs properly to a science which purports to discover, classify, and exhibit the great doctrines of the Bible. . . . [T]he science of interpretation [is] usually designated *hermeneutics*. . . . [L]ogical procedure and scientific method [are the keys to hermeneutics].[22]

Chafer's interest in typology resonates well with many church fathers' interest in the same subject. How surprising, then, to see the common Enlightenment deprecation of tradition's possible contributions as a hermeneutical plank in Chafer's methodology. Indeed, Noll observes a self-confidence in Protestant fundamentalism "bordering on hubris, manifested by an extreme antitraditionalism that casually discounted the possibility of wisdom from earlier generations."[23] Noll notes that Chafer felt that his lack of formal theological training was actually an advantage, protecting him from past errors that might influence his own reading of the Bible. In Chafer's words, "The very fact that I did not study a prescribed course in theology made it possible for me to approach the subject with an unprejudiced mind and to be concerned only with what the Bible actually teaches."[24]

Noll contrasts Craig Blaising, a contemporary dispensationalist, who rightly critiques Chafer for his blithe disregard of historical context and its affect upon the biblical interpreter. Chafer, Blaising writes,

> possessed no methodological awareness of the historicity of interpretation. . . . Furthermore, this hermeneutical deficiency was structured into the very meaning of dispensational thought and practice in its advocacy of clear, plain, normal, or literal interpretation. . . . We have, then, a generation of theologians who find identity in a self-conscious hermeneutic that lacks methodological awareness of the historical nature of interpretation.[25]

Blaising correctly contends that "all theological thought, including one's own theological thought, is historically conditioned by the tradition to which that theologian belongs as well as personal and cultural factors such as education or experience."[26] The question "which tradition?" must then replace the ephemeral hope of sidestepping tradition all together.

Escape from Tradition?

Recent developments indicate the Enlightenment attempt to sidestep all authority and tradition outside of the autonomous reasoning individual represents simply another intellectual and cultural tradition, "a tradition of disparaging the value of tradition."[27] While thinkers rooted in the Enlightenment's optimistic understanding of "history as progress" tend to keep their eyes forward, Roger Lundin is closer to the truth in arguing that "truth might reside in traditions that have been repressed, neglected, or forgotten and that stand in need of recuperation."[28]

Robert Wilken claims that the Enlightenment's exaggerated suspicion of tradition has led to the astonishing modern incapacity to "accept with gratitude what has come before it and what has been done on its behalf." He reminds us that human reason refuses to function within a vacuum. Rather, it is "found within rather than outside of things; it is not an abstract quality that exists independently in the human mind." If so, it is inherently and immensely reasonable to "allow one's hands to be guided by a master, and foolish to go it alone, as though one could learn to play the violin or sculpt a statue by studying a set of instructions."[29]

> In many fields of creative work, immersion in tradition is the presupposition for excellence and originality. Think, for example, of music. On Saturday mornings I often listen to a jazz show on National Public Radio that features interviews with famous and not-so-famous jazz pianists, saxophonists, drummers, trumpeters, etc., and I am regularly struck at how they speak with such respect of teachers and masters, and how to a person they learned to play the piano by first playing in

someone else's style or learned to blow the trumpet by imitating Louis Armstrong or someone else. Similarly, one is impressed with how often a performer like folk singer Jean Redpath speaks about tradition as the necessary condition for making and singing folk music. How often we are admonished not to let the old traditions be forgotten. Why? Surely not for historical or archaeological reasons, but because musicians, like painters and writers and sculptors, know in their fingertips or vocal cords or ears that imitation is the way to excellence and originality.[30] The same can be said for the intellectual life and theological work. As Thomas Oden puts it, watching the church fathers "play theology is like watching Willie Mays play center field or Duke Ellington play 'Sophisticated Lady.'"[31] If, as Wilken argues, the "way we learn to think is by reading good thinkers and letting their thoughts form our thoughts," it is best to submit oneself to learn from those writers who have demonstrated their trustworthiness over time, those who have been tested by the years and found to be reliable interpreters of God's redeeming act in Christ. Wilken reminds us with Augustine that *authority* can designate trustworthiness rather than power, a trust established "through teaching with truthfulness," residing "in a person who by actions as well as words invites trust and confidence. . . . The student's trust is won not simply by words but also by actions, by the kind of person the teacher is—in short, by character."[32]

Wilken's perspective, one shaped by years of immersion in the writings of the church fathers, offers a sound alternative to the exaggerated epistemological and theological individualism prevalent today. Christians, Wilken insists, will find their identity only by recalling an unimagined world, a world that pursued truth "with the mind in the heart"—a community that insisted that how and what one thinks, who one is, and how one lives are an inseparable whole—facilitating a holistic reading of reality frequently reflected in the writings of the church fathers.

Postmodernism: Insights and Evasions

In reaction and response to the Enlightenment elevation of autonomous reason, postmodern hermeneutics insists that it is impossible to separate the interpretation of a text from the gender, culture, language and social location of the interpreter. In various ways the postmodern perspective is a helpful correction to the Enlightenment's exaggerated individualism in

which each individual, on the basis of reason alone, interprets not only the biblical text but the universe. Postmodern hermeneutics has helped us to see that our cultural, historical and social environment affects and conditions what we see and understand of another's text and world.

The danger of the postmodern corrective lies in its tendency to collapse ontology, epistemology and ethics into interpretation itself. As Richard Rorty states, "Hermeneutics . . . is what we get when we are no longer epistemological." Postmodern interpreters, then, are "interested not so much in what is out there in the world, or in what happened in history, as in what we can get out of nature and history for our own uses." Roger Lundin argues that many have lost faith in the power of language to mirror truth. Instead, we employ language as a "therapeutic" tool "to help us get what we desire."[33] The result is Lundin's "culture of interpretation" in which the isolated, expressive, autonomous self runs wild across a subjective landscape. Or, as Alasdair MacIntyre observes, "subjective perspectivism" triumphs because the postmodernist assumes the only alternative to the Enlightenment confidence in autonomous rationality is postmodern subjectivism.[34] Lundin describes this development:

> At a time when confidence in epistemology has eroded significantly, perspectivism appears to afford an opportunity for the isolated self—which has been at the center of Western science, philosophy, and art for more than three centuries—to sustain its faith in its own powers. Even though we may no longer believe in the ability of the self to achieve moral perfection or to acquire indubitable knowledge, we are still able, through our contemporary theories of interpretation, to sustain faith in that self's ability to find satisfaction through the exercise of its creative powers.[35]

Lundin highlights the questions of postmodern philosophers such as Stanley Fish who ask, "Can we any longer speak of absolute values or authorities outside of ourselves?" And what of tradition? Can the past reach us and teach us? Or are its riches forever hidden behind an impenetrable interpretive wall? If so, the result is what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls "interpretation-universalism," in which, as C. Stephen Evans writes, "reality cannot be known as it is in itself, but only as it appears to us humans. We only know things relative to our human conceptual systems, and such systems are irreducibly plural and contingent. . . . *It's all interpretation.*"[36]

Not only does interpretation devour conception, intention and communication, but texts actually serve as vehicles of manipulation, exploitation and oppression, and are attempts by authors to impose their understanding of reality upon us. Thus, the interpreter must handle texts with suspicion and caution. Only our own hermeneutical shield can protect us from the inevitable attempt of other authors to overpower us—a shield popularly known as the hermeneutics of suspicion. What's the hidden agenda? we ask. As C. Stephen Evans warns satirically, "Step aside, Foucault: *To find the truth you gotta read between the lines.*"[37]

Which author's perspective is correct? Victory goes to the author who possesses the greatest rhetorical skill and political power. Interpretation engulfs all reality and becomes the survival of the fittest, or perhaps the most clever. In Roger Lundin's words, "Instead of appealing to authority outside ourselves, we can only seek to marshal our rhetorical abilities to wage the political battles necessary to protect our own preferences and to prohibit expressions of preference that threaten or annoy us."[38]

In fact, as Stanley Fish argues, a society built on postmodern hermeneutical principles is in reality a society of pragmatists. Truth is transmuted into what works, personal and corporate preferences, private pleasures. "All preferences are principled," Fish contends.[39] Richard Rorty defines the just society as "one which has no purpose except freedom. It has no purpose except to make life easier for poets and revolutionaries while seeing to it that they make life harder for others only by words, and not deeds."[40] Freedom, it seems, is the only absolute the postmodern pragmatist can affirm, but it is difficult to discern how one would form a viable ethic on the basis of freedom alone. Virtues effectively developed and nourished only in a communal setting are destined to wither or be stillborn, dying a slow death perhaps, but nevertheless perishing in the individualistic pragmatism of postmodernism.

The Present State of Affairs

So where do we find ourselves in the late twentieth century? The autonomous inquirer of the Enlightenment has proven to be self-deceived and naive. Interpretation and the acquisition of knowledge do not occur in a vacuum. And yet the insights the postmodernists offer seem to lead to the cul-de-sac of pragmatism and perspectivism. Is there a way out? Or have we posited a false dichotomy between the affirmation of tradition and its complete rejection? MacIntyre might well fault us at this point for erring in our concept of tradition. Perhaps, "a genuine tradition is not marked by unreflective rigidity but is distinguished by its very ability to respond to legitimate challenges; in meeting such challenges, the tradition may expand or modify itself in previously unchallenged ways."[41]

It is my belief that the tradition embodied in the reflections of the church fathers on Scripture possesses the flexibility and responsiveness to meet the interpretive and ethical challenges the contemporary world poses. Of course, many will doubt the wisdom and viability of attempting to build a bridge between the world of the fathers and the contemporary world. Enlightenment modernists, still advocating the epistemological sufficiency of autonomous reason, will bristle at the need to look beyond their own rational capabilities. Postmodernists will chuckle at my naiveté, viewing my attempt to link with another's world as an exercise in futility and disguised exploitation. At best, they will argue, my interpretation of early Christian thought and culture will not harm others and may increase my own benefit and pleasure. The hermeneutical distance between our two worlds, though, will remain unbridgeable and I deceive myself to think otherwise.

Many conservative Protestant interpreters, though uncomfortable to find themselves slumbering with Enlightenment and postmodernist bedfellows, will fail to discern or acknowledge the necessity of studying the fathers. The deep-seated Protestant suspicion of tradition and its confidence in the ability of renewed reason alone to understand Scripture will lead many to shy away from investing time and energy in exploring patristic thought, believing it better to focus on the world of the Bible itself. The intervening centuries, some will assert, have largely been characterized by distortion and error, especially in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox worlds. To return to the fathers as a source of interpretation appears to necessitate a return to Rome or Constantinople. For some, radical reformers such as Menno Simons seem much closer to the truth in their call for a return to the pristine world of the early first-century Christian community.

Some early Christian writers struggled with similar issues. Tertullian, writing in the third century, strongly argued that the Christian faith would only develop safely within its own cultural, philosophical and biblical cocoon:

> What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? Our principles come from the Porch of Solomon, who had himself taught that the Lord is to be sought in simplicity of heart. I have no use for a Stoic or Platonic or dialectic Christianity.[42]

Bridges Under Construction

Is it genuinely possible for people living at the dawn of the second millenium to comprehend meaningfully the world of the church fathers? Many will have their doubts, but I believe the attempt should be made. Yet if we succeed in building a bridge to the fathers' world, what will we find when we arrive at their front steps? Will we discover and experience a hospitable environment? Will we be fed or choked by the food they offer us? Can a patristic writer's ideas be relevant and comprehensible to a contemporary person?

Conceptual and ethical bridgebuilding is never easy, whether we are attempting to understand the world of the church fathers or Scripture itself. How well, for example, can one expect a contemporary person raised in a sexually overheated society to understand the idea of chastity? As Tim Stafford observes, "Look at the magazine covers in the grocery-store check-out line, and you will be reminded of how crazy the biblical view sounds to modern people. The ordinary North American takes it as a given that people want things that are not theirs. . . . Of course a woman looks at Paul Newman and thinks how good he would be in bed. What is wrong with wanting it—so long as you don't commit a crime to get it?"[43]

Our modern myopia might convince us that the sexually repressed fathers surely could not understand or identify with twentieth-century sexual propensities, struggles and temptations. And yet once we enter their world we discover that the current inability to distinguish between lust and love was also part of their cultural and personal landscape. They also inhabited a sexually heated society. Augustine sounds terribly contemporary as he relates his infatuation with love itself and its accompanying pleasures:

> I went to Carthage, where I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust. I had not yet fallen in love, but I was in love with the idea of it, and this feeling that something was missing made me despise myself for not being more anxious to satisfy the need. I began looking around for some object for my love, since I badly wanted to love something. . . . To love and have my love returned was my heart's desire, and it would be all the sweeter if I could also enjoy the body of the one who loved me.[44]

Perhaps the Greek and Roman world provides more parallels and possibilities for mutual understanding than one would have thought at first glance. As we have seen, both the Roman and contemporary world are sexually fevered and confused. What of Western society's materialistic, self-centered and self-indulgent propensities? Was the world of the fathers any less so? Extravagance and self-indulgence mark both ages, both without the church and within. One thinks of the Roman emperor Vitellius, formerly the male prostitute of Tiberius, avid gambler, master of ceremonies for Nero's debut on the Roman stage and notorius glutton.[45] Suetonius describes a particularly costly night out:

> The most notorious feast of the series was given him by his brother on his entry into Rome: 2,000 magnificent fish and 7,000 game birds are said to have been served. Yet even this hardly compares in luxuriousness with a single tremendously large dish which Vitellius dedicated to the goddess Minerva and named 'Shield of Minerva the Protectress.' The recipe called for pike-livers, pheasant-brains, peacock-brains, flamingo-tongues, and lamprey-milt; and the ingredients, collected in every corner of the empire from the Parthian frontier to the Spanish Strait (Straits of Gibraltar) were brought to Rome by warships.[46]

Vitellius survived his binges through the use of emetics, but one feels for his friends. We sympathize with Quintus Vibius Crispus, a frequent host for Vitellius's prolonged suppers, who "was once compelled by illness to absent himself for some days from the convivial board. But this, he commented privately to an associate, had saved his life. 'If I had not fallen ill,' he declared, 'I should have died.'"[47]

Sadly enough, we find church fathers such as Clement of Alexandria encountering this same propensity toward extravagance and self-indulgence in their own congregations:

> Those who take delight in what they have hoarded up in their storehouses are foolish in their greed. . . . It is farcical and downright ridiculous for men to bring out urinals of silver and chamber-pots of transparent alabaster as if they were introducing their advisors, and for rich women in their silliness to have gold receptacles for excrements

made, as though being wealthy they were unable to relieve themselves except in a grandiose style.[48]

The temptation to live in two worlds—the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God—tugged as consistently on the fathers and their congregations as it does on the contemporary Western Christian. Therefore, perhaps we can use the image of two worlds to our advantage as we prepare to investigate the world of early Christian writers.

Through Other Lenses

Allow me to speak for a moment of my own culture, that of the United States of America. Most Americans have grown up speaking and reading only one language. Enlightenment ideals have deeply shaped American culture—philosophically, politically, socially and religiously. Most Americans have been raised in nuclear families. Some have had significant relationships with grandparents and aunts and uncles. Others have not. Too many Americans have suffered the pain of growing up with only one parent as a result of divorce. Economic opportunities abound for many Americans. Many Americans are accustomed to a high standard of living. We tend to view our money and possessions as our own private sphere. Prying eyes are not welcome here. Sexual issues occupy much of our thinking, perhaps exaggeratedly so. Increasingly, we have more and more leisure time. We are entertainment oriented and media driven. Violence both repels and attracts us. We know what we want and we want it now. Immediate self-gratification appears to be a top priority. We have a hard time waiting, whether it be at the grocery store check-out counter, the bus stop, the airline terminal or in church. While other characteristics of American culture might occur to other Americans, I have chosen to present a sampler of how Americans tend to view and live in the world around them.

How might growing up in the modern global village both facilitate and cripple my understanding of the gospel? What aspects of my family background, language, political philosophy, media exposure, gender, ecclesiastical heritage, national history, psychological make-up and other cultural and personal characteristics aid and obstruct my understanding of Scripture and its central message? What are the personal and cultural lenses through which I read the Bible? What aspects of Scripture do they bring into clear focus? What aspects do they blur or skew?

Learning to read the Bible through the eyes of Christians from a different time and place will readily reveal the distorting effect of our own cultural, historical, linguistic, philosophical and, yes, even theological lenses. This is not to assert that the fathers did not have their own warped perspectives and blind spots. It is to argue, however, that we will not arrive at perspective and clarity regarding our own strengths and weaknesses if we refuse to look beyond our own theological and hermeneutical noses. God has been active throughout the church's history and we rob ourselves of the Holy Spirit's gifts if we refuse to budge beyond the comfort zone of our own ideas.

Michael Casey offers wise advice at this juncture. He reminds us that "the Holy Spirit did not cease being active in the Church with the last page of the New Testament." Rather, throughout the centuries Scripture and God's Spirit "have so infused the lives of countless men and women that they themselves became living gospels." As these Christians—in this case the church fathers—lived and thought out the implications of the Bible, the latent wisdom of Scripture bubbled to the surface in their sermons, commentaries, treatises and prayers. This did not happen infallibly or inerrantly but in such a manner that Christians living in later ages can still drink profitably from the well of patristic exegesis.

> Such insights were not automatically guaranteed. It was only when generations of believers found in them accurate reflections of their own spiritual experience that these secondary texts began to have some measure of *auctoritas*. . . . Just as a good preacher can make the inspired word come alive for those who hear, so reading these classical Christian treatises can help translate the Bible from the past of history to the present of our own lives.[49]

As we have seen, many postmodern interpreters doubt the possibility of genuinely entering another's world. I disagree, but realize the task is a formidable one, requiring certain dispositions on the part of the voyager. Foremost among these is humility—a willingness to admit that our own self-estimation is often inflated and exaggerated. We must be convinced that the church fathers, people who often spoke differently and lived strangely—at least at first glance—actually have something they can teach us. Our ability to learn from them will largely be determined by our willingness to remain quiet and simply listen, perhaps listen more fervently than we have for a long time. In turn, our willingness to listen will

be influenced by our expectations, hopes, prejudices and presuppositions. Some of us, especially those unfamiliar with the world of patristic thought, will have to trust the testimony of many who have come before us or have recently discovered the riches of patristic exegesis. The advice of Ambrose comes to mind:

> For there is but one true teacher, the only one who never learned what he taught everyone. But men have first to learn what they are to teach, and receive from him what they are to give to others. Now what ought we to learn before everything else, but to be silent that we may be able to speak?... It is seldom that anyone is silent, even when speaking does him no good.[50]

Listening will not come easily. We will struggle to overcome deep-set suspicions. Past prejudices will need silencing. Some of us will be tempted to react too quickly to perceived error. We will need to familiarize ourselves with new words, themes and concepts. And yet the effort will prove rewarding if we persevere. One of my goals in this book is to provide as broad an informational and conceptual grid as possible for understanding the thought of the fathers as they read the Bible.

My counsel is to surround your entrance into the world of the fathers with humility, self-awareness, a listening ear, prayer and a sense of humor. It is better to chuckle at the periodic patristic quirk than to allow our self-righteous anger to wall off their insights. We are all prone to error. We are all quick to spot the exegetical log in our brother or sister's eye. We are all apt to be blind to our own weaknesses in reading Scripture. We are all hermeneutically disabled in one area or another. How can we hope to understand the Bible if we needlessly cut ourselves off from our own community's reflection and history? We need one another and each other's insights, past and present, if we are to understand the Bible. The desert fathers were especially sensitive to the necessity of humility and community if one was to comprehend Scripture:

> They tell the story of another old man who persevered in fasting for seventy weeks, eating only once a week. He asked of God about [the meaning of] a certain passage in holy Scripture and God did not reveal it to him. He said to himself, "See how much labor I have undertaken and it has been of no profit to me. I will go, therefore, to my brother and ask him about it." He went outside and closed the door to go out and an angel of the Lord was sent to him, saying, "The seventy weeks you fasted did not make you any closer to God. Now, because you have been humbled and are going off to your brother, I have been sent to explain the passage to you." He opened to him what he sought and then went away.[51]

We will occasionally find the fathers infuriating, dense and perplexing. At other times we will wonder, Why have I never seen this in the Bible before? Why was I never taught this? How could I have been so blind? In their best moments the fathers will lead us into a renewed sense of wonder, awe and reverence for God and the gospel. Through the fathers' influence, prayer and worship may well become more frequent companions to our exegetical study. And though greater familiarity with the fathers will periodically magnify their own weaknesses, our own blind spots will be much more clear to us because of the time we have spent with figures such as Augustine, Chrysostom, Athanasius, Jerome, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil, Ambrose or Gregory the Great.

What are the blind spots in our culture or our own lives that need to be exposed to the light of ancient wisdom? Francis Young believes that the church fathers belonged to an important intellectual tradition and wrestled with many of the same issues theologians, philosophers, pastors, and laypeople face today. "To see these questions debated in a quite different intellectual [and historical setting]" is edifying, says Young, "for it enables us to step outside our own culturally-conditioned presuppositions and see the issues" in a clearer light.[52] The distance between the contemporary reader and the fathers, then, can genuinely become an advantage to be appreciated. Michael Casey describes the liberation made possible by this distance:

> One of the factors that I appreciate in reading ancient authors is that they come from a distant culture. This means they build on a distinctive infrastructure of beliefs and values. When they comment on a text or discourse on a value, they approach things from a different angle and so often have something original to say. This is not to assert that their cultural values were necessarily better than ours. It simply means that they were more aware of some aspects of truth than we are—just as we know more than them in some matters. When we have recourse to writers of antiquity, we have the opportunity to compensate for the blind spots inherent in our particular culture. They help us move toward a more integral wisdom by challenging many of our presuppo-

sitions. Because they are unaffected by our particular cultural bias, they can help liberate us from the invisible ideology inherent in our uncritical assumptions about the nature of reality.[53]

Simply put, reading the fathers can be surprisingly relevant for the contemporary Christian because the fathers tend to grasp facets of the gospel that modern sensibilities too often overlook. They hear music in Scripture to which we remain tone-deaf. They frequently emphasize truths that contemporary Christians dearly need to remember. As this chapter draws to a close, I first want to share a story from a modern exegete illustrating this principle, and second, to relate a specific instance of a patristic insight widely overlooked today.

Hermeneutical Proximity

New Testament scholar Dale C. Allison Jr., a leading authority on the Gospel of Matthew, comments that Matthew "did not trumpet all his intentions."[54] Although Matthew's agenda is clear in many instances, Allison observes that "he also left much, even of importance, unsaid." For example, Matthew includes the names of four women in his opening genealogy of Jesus' heritage, but never tells us why. What is he up to? Allison speculates that "Perhaps our evangelist expected too much of his readers. Or—and this is my own supposition—his first readers were better equipped than us." That is, Matthew's initial readers "had a knowledge we lack, a knowledge . . . of the tradition behind the Gospel, which tradition has ceased to be."

Not only does Matthew not inform the reader as to all his intentions, but he also fails "to instruct us about his literary methods." Matthew is writing within the context of common cultural and literary conventions that he takes for granted, as do his first readers. There is no need to explain something everyone understands. Hence the problem for contemporary readers. They will have to hunt for conventional information earlier folk already understood.

Allison sees Matthew's Gospel as "a chapter in a book." By this he means that "the ubiquitous scriptural citations and allusions—which are anything but detachable ornamentation—direct the reader to other books and so teach that Matthew is not a self-contained entity: much is missing." Matthew's Gospel, Allison understands, "stipulates that it be interpreted in the context of other texts. . . . [I]t is, in a fundamental sense, an

incomplete utterance, a book full of holes." It is the reader who must supply what is missing, a reader possessing the knowledge Matthew presupposes, which comes from "a pre-existing collection of interacting texts, the Jewish Bible." Matthew's text, then, is a "mnemonic device, designed . . . to trigger intertextual exchanges which depend upon informed and imaginative reading."

The central problem facing contemporary readers is their lack of this intertextual background. Without it, how are they to know when a biblical writer is alluding to another text? Allison believes that biblical scholars fail to provide the scholia readers need to spot readily the texts' literary artistry and interconnections. "Time removes us from all texts and subtexts and so cripples our ability to detect tacit references—which is why, as history marches on, annotated editions of the classics, including the Bible, become longer and longer."

The central difficulty is the contemporary reader's "historically conditioned deafness to oblique allusions in the Bible." In fact, because of our deafness we can begin to doubt whether allusions are present at all. Are the musical notes genuinely present in the text or not? Before we conclude that we are simply imagining false melodies, however, Allison provides a helpful contemporary analogy.

> Those who habitually listen to music over the radio can often identify a popular song after hearing just the smallest portion of it. There are in fact contests—I have heard them—which require people to name a musical piece after hearing only a slight excerpt from it, one lasting no more than a second or two, and consisting of no more than two or three notes or chords. The uninitiated will discern only noise. But to those with the requisite musical knowledge (gained, be it noted, not through arduous study but through effortless listening), the briefest extract can conjure up a world: a song, an album, a musical group. Was it maybe not similar with those Jews who first heard the Gospel of Matthew? Are we not sometimes forced to pick up a concordance in order to perceive connections which were once immediately grasped by trained ears with unconscious sureness?

At this juncture the *hermeneutical proximity* of the fathers to the biblical text is especially helpful. "For they were, in so many ways, closer to the first century Christians than we are—for they, unlike most of us, lived and moved and had their being in the Scriptures." In many ways, the

Scriptures—listened to for many years by patristic writers—were their popular music.

They still read aloud. They still had a small literary canon. They still had, because of their educational methods, magnificent memorization skills. And they still heard Scripture chanted. They were accordingly attuned to *hear* things we no longer *hear*, things which we can only *see* after picking up concordances or doing word searches on our computers. I have come to believe that if we find in Matthew or another NT book an allusion to the OT that the Fathers did not find, the burden of proof is on us; and if they detected an allusion which we—here I am thinking of modern commentaries—have not detected, investigation is in order.

How might Allison's viewpoint on the fathers encourage biblical scholars and readers to understand and interact with the Bible more effectively? Referring to Jesus' statement in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," Allison admits, "No commentary known to me—this includes my own—refers to Moses in connection with Matt. 5:5." And yet, Allison observes, Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrrhus and Eusebius link Moses to Jesus' teaching. Theodoret cites Numbers 12:3, a text referring to Moses as "very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth." Eusebius comments that "whereas Jesus promised the meek inheritance of the earth, Moses promised Israel inheritance of the land." Allison suggests:

> Perhaps we should follow the interpretive lead of Theodoret and Eusebius and set Matt. 5:5 against the Moses traditions. Moses was, in meekness, the exemplar. He promised the Israelites inheritance of the land. And he himself did not enter the land. From this last fact, sufficiently unexpected to have engendered much rabbinic reflection, one might extract that the third beatitude pledges something Moses never gained. On such an interpretation, the members of the new covenant would be more blessed than the chief figure of the old: if, in the past, the meek one did not enter the land, now, that the kingdom of God has come, "the meek shall inherit the earth." One thinks of Matt. 11:11: the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than all of those who came before.

Allison remains undecided about the Moses allusion in Matthew 5:5. He does believe, though, that such an allusion should be seriously considered,

that it has fruitful homiletical possibilities, and that it clearly tells us what the fathers themselves heard when they listened to the passage. Again, the hermeneutical proximity of the fathers to Scripture has picked up tonal qualities of the text that would remain mute for modern readers if the scholar, pastor or layperson relied solely on recent exegesis. The fathers hear and see where we tend to be deaf and blind.

Exegesis and Spiritual Formation

The fathers affirmed a deep connection between the spiritual health of biblical interpreters and their ability to read the Bible well. For the fathers, the Scripture was to be studied, pondered and exegeted within the context of worship, reverence and holiness. The fathers considered the Bible a holy book that opened itself to those who themselves were progressing in holiness through the grace and power of the Spirit. The character of the exegete would determine in many ways what was seen or heard in the text itself. Character and exegesis were intimately related.

For example, in his well-known work, *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius adamantly insists that

> the searching and right understanding of the Scriptures [demands] a good life and a pure soul. . . . One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life. . . . Anyone who wants to look at sunlight naturally wipes his eye clear first, in order to make, at any rate, some approximation to the purity of that on which he looks; and a person wishing to see a city or country goes to the place in order to do so. Similarly, anyone who wishes to understand the mind of the sacred writers must first cleanse his own life, and approach the saints by copying their deeds. Thus united to them in the fellowship of life, he will both understand the things revealed to them by God and, thenceforth escaping the peril that threatens sinners in the judgment, will receive that which is laid up for the saints in the kingdom of heaven.[55]

Gregory of Nazianzus offers much the same advice in his theological orations. Studying and speaking well about God does not belong to everyone, not "before every audience, nor at all times, nor on all points; but on certain occasions, and before certain persons, and within certain limits." Gregory insists that theological study "is permitted only to those who have been examined, and are past masters in meditation, and who

have been previously purified in soul and body, or at the very least are being purified."[56]

Neither Athanasius nor Gregory envisioned exegesis or theology as the academic activity of biblical scholars or theologians divorced from the life of the church or personal spiritual formation. Rather, the fathers believed, the best exegesis occurs within the community of the church. The Scriptures have been given to the church, are read, preached, heard and comprehended within the community of the church, and are safely interpreted only by those whose character is continually being formed by prayer, worship, meditation, self-examination, confession and other means by which Christ's grace is communicated to his body. That is to say, the fathers argue that any divorce between personal character, Christian community and the study of Scripture will be fatal for any attempt to understand the Bible. This holistic, communal approach is surely a methodology that warrants a close investigation in our highly individualistic, specialized, segmented world.

The fathers' insistence on spiritual health and integrity as we approach the Bible is advice we must heed. Sadly, our words and lives too often do not fit together. We are not one piece. The fathers' call to wholeness and integrity, to allow our lives to be shaped by the narrative of Scripture within the community of the church—so that we can understand and communicate that narrative in an ever more faithful manner—is a sine qua non for understanding how and why the fathers go about the business of exegesis. The dialectic between spiritual growth, character formation and understanding Scripture is a crucial patristic insight. We will examine this relationship in more detail in future chapters.

THREE

WHO ARE THE FATHERS?

THE APPELLATION "CHURCH FATHER" RAISES A NUMBER OF questions for modern persons: What is a church father? Who qualifies as a father? How did these men receive this designation? What qualifications had to be met to receive the title? Are certain fathers particularly important, in some ways in a class by themselves?

What of the "Mothers" of the Church?

And what of "church mothers"? Were there not significant women contributing to the life and thought of the early church? Does not the title "church father" discriminate against them, leaving modern readers with the impression that the only significant figures in early Christianity were male? Would not a title such as "early Christian writer" be more appropriate and overcome the danger of misunderstanding, prejudice and discrimination? Is it fair or wise to retain such a loaded and potentially harmful title as "church father" in a modern context?

Without doubt there were many significant women in the life of the