

Patristic Witnesses to The Text of Scripture

Cliff Sabroe

Sir David Dalrymple was once asked, “Suppose that the New Testament had been destroyed, and every copy of it lost by the end of the third century, could it have been collected together again from the writings of the Fathers of the second and third centuries?” (Geisler 430). After many years of studying the writings of the Fathers he was able to report boldly his findings with this statement: “Look at those books. You remember the question about the New Testament and the Fathers? That question roused my curiosity, and as I possessed all the existing works of the Fathers of the second and third centuries, I commenced to search, and up to this time I have found the entire New Testament, except 11 verses” (Leach 35-6).

It is the aim of this writing to give a brief definition of who the church Fathers were, when they wrote, what they wrote, and the value of their writings as witnesses to the canonization and inspiration of Scripture.

WHO WERE THE CHURCH FATHERS?

The **Church Fathers** or **Fathers of the Church** or **Patristics** are terms used to describe the influential writers in the early Christian era, particularly those of the first few centuries of Christian history. The term is used loosely in reference of writers and teachers of the church. The term is not used to refer to founders of the church, as there is only one founder and that founder being Jesus Christ, the term is neither used in reference to inspired Apostles or any writer of the New Testament. In fact it could probably be assumed that these early Christian writers would take offense to the title “Church Father” for they just considered themselves followers of Christ, and many of

them we would view as being . David Bercot in his book “Will The Real Heretics Please Stand Up” makes this statement concerning the designation “Church Father”.

When I start talking about the early Christian writers people usually respond by saying “Oh, you mean the early church fathers.” *But these men were not church fathers!* Most of them were fairly ordinary, hard-working Christian leaders with above-average education. They would have been highly indignant at being called “church fathers.” The only “church fathers” they recognized were the apostles.

Actually, the very fact that these writers were *not* church fathers is what makes their writings so valuable. If these men had been great founders of theology, their writings would be of limited value to us. They would simply tell us what doctrines these particular “founding theologians” had developed. But these men did not write theological treatises. In fact, no one in the second century church can even be called a theologian in the modern sense. And there is no real systematic theology in the entire pre-Constantine church (Bercot 6).

There are differing opinions concerning who should be considered a Church Father. Some classify them based upon the time or era that they wrote; others classify them based upon the significance of their particular writings. Bruce Metzger has formed a list of who he considers as the significant Church Fathers. The list is as follows

1. Athanasius
2. Augustine
3. Chrysostom
4. Clement of Alexandria
5. Cyprian
6. Cyril of Alexandria

7. Didymus of Alexandria
8. Ephraem the Syrian
9. Epiphanius
10. Eusebius
11. Gregory of Nazianzus
12. Gregory of Nyssa
13. Hilary of Poitiers
14. Hippolytus
15. Irenaeus
16. Isidore
17. Jerome
18. Justin Martyr
19. Lucifer of Calaris
20. Marcion
21. Origen
22. Pelagius
23. Primasius
24. Pseudo-Hieronymus
25. Rufinus
26. Tatian
27. Tertullian
28. Theodore (Metzger 88-9).

This list by no means exhaustive, depending on what criteria is used to determine who is a Church Father the list will change. With this in mind, the above list is an adequate record of who is considered by most to be an Early Church Father.

BREIF INTRODUCTIONS TO IMPORATANT EARLY CHURCH WRITTERS

Time and space do not permit a lengthy discussion on the lives of every significant Early Church Father. This writers does consider it important to understand a few details about some of the most important writers from this era in Church History.

Polycarp – (- 155 A.D) Polycarp is best known as being a disciple of the Apostle John. He was a model of faith to the congregations of the Lord's church in Asia. As mentioned he was a personal companion and a student of the Apostle John. Polycarp lived until he was at least 87 and was ultimately martyred around 155 A.D. The story of the execution of Polycarp is one that is quite well known. It is said that he was arrested

and taken before the Roman proconsul. By this time Polycarp was a frail old man not at all resembling the powerful leader that he was. It is said that the proconsul asked him to "Curse Jesus Christ!", and as many history books record Polycarp responded with this magnificent statement, "For eighty-six years I've served Jesus, and he has never wronged me in any way. How, then, can I possibly curse my very King and Savior". (Bercot 2, Foxe 22). It is then stated, that after further discourse with the proconsul Polycarp was lead away to be burned at the stake. While in the arena Polycarp was given an opportunity in the arena to save himself by denying Christ again. The proconsul followed the procedure outlined by Pliny and told Polycarp to say, "Away with the atheists" meaning the Christians in the denial of the Roman gods. But Polycarp pointed to the onlookers in the stadium and shouted "Away with the atheists." Polycarp replied to the magistrate that the fire, which burns for an hour, is not to be compared to the fire of eternal punishment. As the flames began to consume him, he prayed: "I bless you that you deemed me worthy of this day and hour." (Foxe 23-4). It is said that the Roman guards proceeded to nail him to the stake, but while doing this he calmly assured the soldiers, "Leave me as I am. The one who gives me strength to endure the fire will also enable me to remain motionless against the stake without having to be secured." (Bercot 4). Polycarp was then allowed to bow and offer up a prayer to Almighty God. After he said the final "Amen" the Roman soldiers lit the wood. (This author wants his readers to note that some of the aforementioned quotations may be supposition on the writer's part.)

Irenaeus – (130 – 202 A.D) One of Polycarp's students was a man by the name of Irenaeus. Irenaeus was one of the leaders in the congregation in Lyons, France. The

early church spoke very highly of Irenaeus. He lived to around 200 A.D and since he was a student of Polycarp who was a student of the Apostle John, he served as a crucial human link to the age of the disciples (Bercot 8).

Irenaeus plays an important role in the study of the New Testament text. Irenaeus made great usage of the New Testament in his writings (for he wrote in Greek). His quotations were often very clear and may serve as an early representation of the Greek side of the Codex Bezae. Not only were Irenaeus' quotes of scripture very clear, they also serve as evidence to the canonization of scripture. He makes more than eighteen hundred quotations from the New Testament, and these quotes indicate that the canon of the New Testament recognized during his time is practically the same as it is today (Geisler 425-6).

Justin – (- 160 A.D) Justin was a Philosopher turned evangelist. The story goes that he was walking along one day and was approached by an older Christian man. It is said that this old man began to ask some religious questions of Justin that caused him to see the weakness in human philosophy. Justin in his conversation with Trypho basically declares that Christianity is the only true and worthwhile philosophy. (Justin *Dialogue with Trypho*)

Justin ended up being a gifted evangelist who preached to many Romans. Toward the end of his life a group of philosophers plotted against him and had him arrested. Justin would not denounce Christ and was thus executed around the year 165 A.D. After his death he became known as Justin the Martyr, or simply Justin Martyr. Justin's writings contain more than 330 citations of the New Testament along with 266 allusions. Most of

Justin's quotations were from the Gospels, but in several places he does allude to the Epistles of Paul.

Tatian – (110 – 174 A.D). Tatian wrote a couple significant early Christian documents. First of which, being the *Oratio* which was a defense of Christian faith and a condemnation of paganism. Tatian is most well-known for his *Diatessaron* (the first ever Harmony of the Gospels). The *Diatessaron* gained widespread popularity, but due to Tatian's association with a heretical sect of the Encratites, many wanted to see it destroyed.

Tatian's work was so popular that a Syrian Father by the name of Ephraem (of whom the Codex bearing his name is named after) felt compelled to write a commentary on it. Despite the popularity of this work, Theodoret had all the copies destroyed because he felt that it would corrupt Christianity. Ephraem's commentary and the *diatessaron* are thus both lost, but an Armenian translation of Ephraem's commentary still remains (Metzger 91-2).

Clement of Alexandria - (150 – 215 A.D) Clement was another former philosopher turned Christian. Clement preached all over the Roman Empire and wrote several documents pertaining to Christianity around 190 A.D. Clement eventually settled in Alexandria Egypt, hence the title "Clement of Alexandria". It is said that he was an elder for the church in Alexandria and while in Alexandria he became the head of the Catechetical School located there.

In his writings he quoted both the Old and New Testaments extensively. He cited all of the New Testament books except for James, 2 Peter and Philemon. "There are some twenty-four hundred citations of the New Testament, including over one thousand

from the gospels and over one thousand from the Pauline epistles. It is interesting to note that Clement quoted all the Old Testament books except Song of Solomon and Ruth” (Geisler 426).

Tertullian – (160 – 220 A.D). Tertullian was a leader in the North African church of Carthage. He was a contemporary of Clement and is noted as being one of the most gifted apologists of the early church, and he was one of the few elders who wrote in Latin rather than in Greek. Tertullian is remembered for many memorable sayings such as “the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.” To some he is considered the “Father of Latin Christianity”.

His work was apologetical, polemical, practical, and also in the later part of his life very pro-Montanist. Tertullian penned his writings during a span of about twenty years, from 190-210 A.D. His writings do contain numerous quotations of scripture; in fact, he makes more than seventy-two hundred quotations of the New Testament.

Origen – (185 – 254 A.D) Origen was one of Clement’s students in Alexandria. Origen’s father was a Christian and he taught his son grammar and Greek literature at an early age. This early education prepared Origen for a life of scholarship. Due to persecution, Clement had to leave Alexandria, which vacated the head teacher position at the Catechetical School. It was decided that even though Origen was a young man (only 18) he was best suited for the task of being the head of the school.

Origen worked hard as a teacher and a student. He taught hundreds, wrote on several Christian subjects, and even produced a few commentaries. His writings gained him a great deal of fame, which ultimately lead to a great deal of persecution. Origen

was able to avoid death from his persecutors till the age of 70 when he was finally caught and tortured. The tortures in the end lead to his death.

Origen was without a doubt the most prolific writer of the early church. His works total over six thousand. In his writings he made nearly eighteen thousand quotations from the New Testament alone. The most famous of all of Origen's works would be his *Hexapla*. The Hexapla was the first real attempt at modern textual criticism in which he compared variant Old Testament readings. The Hexapla was also the first representation of a parallel Bible.

The arrangement of the Hexapla was in six parallel columns. Each column contained the Old Testament in the original Hebrew or a particular version...The six columns were arranged as follows: column one, the Hebrew original; column two, the Hebrew original transliterated into Greek letters; column three, the literal translation of Aquila; column four, the idiomatic revision of Symmachus; column five, Origen's own revision of the LXX; and column six, the Greek revision of Theodotion (Geisler 507-8).

Origen's Hexapla was truly an awesome work that was years ahead of his time and contemporaries. Concerning this magnificent work F.F Bruce writes: "If Origen's Hexapla had survived entire, it would be a treasure beyond price" (Bruce 155). Geisler and Nix relay the same thought when they write: "That is certainly true, (that the Hexapla's survival would be monumental) as it would have given the standard Hebrew text of the third century A.D., have aided in the disputation over Hebrew pronunciation, and have given information about the Greek versions of the Old Testament in Origen's

day” (Geisler 509). However, the entire text of this great work did not survive. It was initially housed in the library at Caesarea until the Saracens conquered and burned the city in 638. It was at this time that the manuscript was probably destroyed, although the fifth column has survived and an eight-century copy of it is housed in the museum at Milan.

Cyprian – (195 – 258 A.D). Cyprian came on to the scene a few decades after Tertullian. He was a wealthy Roman who was converted to Christianity at the age of 40. We was selected to serve as an overseer of the church in Carthage.

Cyprians writings are very valuable, few of the reasons are:

...because they consist chiefly of correspondence with the leaders of other churches, revealing the everyday concerns and problems of Christian congregations during that period. Cyprian was forced to carry on much of his pastoral work underground, since intense persecution raged during much of his ministry. He was a tireless shepherd, pouring out his energy, and ultimately his very life, for the flock that Christ entrusted to him. He was finally arrested by the Romans and beheaded in 258 (Bercot 13).

Cyprian was on of most accurate scripture quoters in the early church. In his writings, he makes 740 Old and 1,030 New Testament quotations. He cited all of the books of the New Testament except for Philemon and 2 John.

TEACHINGS OF THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

The purpose of examining the Church Fathers in this writing is to present them as evidence to the New Testament canon as we have it today. H To most students of the Bible, however, the number one benefit of using the writings of the fathers is that

they often times will shed light on what the common beliefs of the church were at a particular time. It should, nonetheless, be noted that no doctrine can be formed solely on the basis of a Patristic teaching without any New Testament support. Often times the teachings of the Early Church Fathers were false, their interpretations were misguided, and through many of their beliefs the New Testament church went into apostasy. This being said, it is wonderful to observe what the early church writers believed concerning various topics.

WHAT THE CHURCH FATHERS BELIEVED CONCERNING...

The Meaning of Baptism:

...In order that we may not remain the children of necessity and of ignorance, but may obtain in the water the remission of sins formerly committed, there is pronounced over him who chooses to be born again, and has repented of sins, the name of God the Father and Lord of the universe... (160 A.D) (Justin Martyr. *The First Apology of Justin* 1:183)

When we come to refute them (the Gnostics) we will show in its proper place that this class of men have been instigated by Satan to a denial that baptism which is regeneration to God. Thus they have renounced the whole faith... For the baptism instituted by the visible Jesus was for the remission of sins. (180 A.D) (Irenaeus. *Against Heresies* 1.346).

The union of the Logos with baptism is like the agreement of milk with water. For, of all liquids, milk alone receives water. It allows itself to be mixed with water for the purpose of cleansing – just as baptism does for

the remission of sins. (195 A.D) (Clement of Alexandria. *The Instructor* 2.222).

“Unless a man has been born again of water and Spirit, he will not enter into the kingdom of the heavens.” These words have tied faith to the necessity of baptism. Accordingly, all thereafter who became believers were baptized. So it was, too, that Paul, when he believed was baptized. (198 A.D) (Tertullian. *On Baptism* 3.676).

...from that death which once the blood of Christ extinguished and from which the saving grace of baptism and of our Redeemer has delivered us. (250 A.D) (Cyprian. *The Epistles of Cyprian* 5.332).

Evolution

Man is not merely a rational animal, who happens to be capable of understanding and knowledge – as the croaking philosophers say. (160 A.D) (Tatian. *Address of Tatian to the Greeks* 2.71).

(Celsus) does his utmost to reduce the human race to a still lower position and to bring them to the level of irrational animals.(248 A.D) (Origen *Against Celsus* 4.535).

Predestination and Free-Will

Neither do we maintain that it is by fate that men do what they do, or suffer what they suffer. Rather we maintain that each man acts rightly or sins by his own free choice. (160 A.D) (Justin Martyr. *The Second Apology of Justin* 1.190).

It was God's desire that both angels and men, who were endowed with free will... that if they choose the things acceptable to Him, He would keep them free from death and from punishment. However if they did evil, He would punish each as He sees fit. (160 A.D) (Justin Martyr. *Diaglogue with Trypho* 1.243).

Sin then, is voluntary on my part. (195 A.D) (Clement of Alexandria. *The Stromata or Miscellanies* 2.362).

Homosexuality and Pedophilia

Peaederasty is condemned by the barbarians. However, by the Romans it is honored with certain privileges. In fact, they try to collect herds of boys like grazing horses. (160 A.D) (Tatian. *Address to the Greeks* 2.77).

The whole earth has now become full of fornication and wickedness. I admire the ancient legislators of the Romans. These men detested effeminacy of conduct. The giving of the body to feminine purposes, contrary to the law of nature, they judged worthy of the most extreme penalty. (195 A.D) (Clement of Alexandria. *The Instructor* 2.277).

I find no dress cursed by God except a woman's dress on a man. For he says, "Cursed is everyone who clothes himself in woman's attire". (200 A.D) (Tertullian. *On Idolatry* 3.71).

The Early Church Fathers dealt with every religious topic that we deal with today. The ones mentioned above do not even touch the surface of what is available. It is wonderful to observe that faithful students of God's word were able to draw out the same conclusions that we draw out today when we study the word of God. God's word

is unchanging, it is just as applicable today as it was in the first few centuries. The dedication that these Early Church writers had in digging deep into the depths of God's word to find out his commands is something that all should emulate.

BENEFITS OF THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

The writings of the Early Church Fathers contain much beneficial and needful information. They are not a primary witness to the text of the new testament, but they do serve two important roles in this regard First they give overwhelming support to the existence of the authoritative books of the New Testament canon. It is true that many times their quotations were often loose, although in the case of some Fathers they were very accurate and percise, but they do at least produce the substantial content of the original text. Second, the quotations are so numerous and widespread that if no manuscript of the New Testament were extant, the New Testament could be reproduced just from the writings of the early Fathers by themselves (Geisler 430).

CONCLUSIONS

There are many great items that can be gleaned when studying the Patristic quotations of scripture. One can observe the problems that the early church faced and how they dealt with them. One can examine what there Bibles consisted of and compare that with ours and notice they are the same. One can see the various text types that were in the different regions, and it one can also determine the different factors that lead to the apostasy. It is important to study the Fathers. J. Harold Greenlee writes in his book concerning the value of the Fathers:

The Fathers are from the early centuries, the approximate time when they wrote is known, and they may be identified more or less with particular

localities. This means, then, that if the form in which a Father quoted the New Testament can be satisfactorily be determined from the extant manuscripts of his works, light is thereby shed upon the form of the New Testament text in use in the region where and at the date when that Father lived (Greenlee 46-7).

As has been stated previously concerning the Patristic quotations. “These quotations are so extensive that the New Testament could virtually be reconstructed from them without the use of New Testament Manuscripts” (ibid).

The Church Fathers are just one of the many evidences to the fact that God has, and continues to preserve for mankind his, uncorrupted, unchanging, soul saving word. Whether it be in manuscript, or Patristic quotation form, God deserves our gratitude for preserving His Bible for us.

Works Cited

- Bercot, David. Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up. Tyler TX: Scroll Publishing, 1999.
- A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998.
- Bruce, F.F The Canon of Scripture. Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1988.
- Clement of Alexandria. The Instructor. The Anti Nicene Fathers, vol.2 N.p., n.d.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.
- The Stromata or Miscellanies. The Anti Nicene Fathers, vol.2 N.p., n.d.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.
- Cyprian. The Epistles of Cyprian. The Anti Nicene Fathers, vol.5 N.p., n.d.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.
- Foxe, John. Foxes Book of Martyrs. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003.
- Geisler, Norman and William E. Nix A General Introduction to the Bible. Chicago: Moody Press, 1986.
- Greenlee, Harold J. Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972.
- Irenaeus. Against Heresies. The Anti Nicene Fathers, vol.1 N.p., n.d.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004..
- Justin Martyr. Dialogue With Tyrpho. The Anti Nicene Fathers, vol.1 N.p., n.d.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004..
- The First Apology of Justin. The Anti Nicene Fathers, vol.1 N.p., n.d.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.

--- The Second Apology of Justin. The Anti Nicene Fathers, vol.1 N.p., n.d.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.

Leach, Charles. Our Bible: How We Got It? London: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1898.

Metzger, Bruce M. The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.

Origen. Against Celsus. The Anti Nicene Fathers, vol.4 N.p., n.d.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004..

Tatian. Address of Tatian to the Greeks. The Anti Nicene Fathers, vol.2 N.p., n.d.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.

Tertullian. On Baptism. The Anti Nicene Fathers, vol.3 N.p., n.d.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.

--- On Idolatry. The Anti Nicene Fathers, vol.3 N.p., n.d.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.