

What Do We Learn From The Early Church Fathers?

There seems today to be a renewed interest in the writings of what are called the “Early Church Fathers.” These are primarily the late first through fourth century authors of Scripture related writings that have survived the ages. They were interpreters of the Holy Bible who chose in many cases to add or subtract or concoct their own, what turned out to be distorted versions of God’s Word. The writing that survived, in many cases as we shall see, while grossly heretical were incorporated into the dogma of what became the Catholic Church. While these men are traditionally called “Father”, they would better be called the church “influencers.” I don’t believe that at least those listed here, deserve the positive connotation that “father” implies. When the term “father” is applied to the Apostles, and to what they said and wrote, this is excellent biblical guidance, because this is pure unadulterated ecclesiology. It is pure truth because it is God’s Word! However, this is not true as applied to what today are commonly called “church fathers”.

There is today, considerable interest in the writings of the more notable late first century through the fifth century leaders, writers and influencers of the post apostolic Christian thought and doctrine. While perhaps many were truly inspired and provided valuable insights regarding many aspects of the Scripture, their writings are also peppered with misinterpretations as well as various forms of what those who are biblically literate must call heresy and false contrived doctrine. This of course is exactly what those seeking “unity through equivalence” want. They want to complete the undermining of the remnant church of the reformation and return it to Rome. Their definition of church unity is total re-absorption into Roman Catholicism. As we read some of what these early “church fathers” modified of what Christ Jesus and His apostles had established as the New Testament Word of God, we can see clearly the insidious nature of this particular attack on biblical Christianity.

1. Ignatius (50± AD -110± AD) He was the “Bishop” of Antioch, probably the largest Christian body of that day. He taught that churches must have elders and a

ruling bishop, one of superior authority over the elders. He also asserted that a church had no authority to conduct communion unless it had a bishop, and that all churches were to be part of one universal church. Thus he preached that there must be a hierarchy or rulership authority over the church. This of course is contrary to what Jesus said in Revelation 2:6 and 3:15 where He speaks against the Nicolaitans “*which thing I hate.*” Whatever may have been their doctrine, the word “nicolaitans” maybe translated as “rulers over the people,” thus a hierarchical layering of rulers of the church.

We may forgive Ignatius for this stand because Revelation had not yet been written. This doctrine was carried over into the Pergamos church age and beyond. This age might be considered the phase of church history from 110 AD to 313± AD. Although his assertions may have been quite innocent, look at what they led to during the following centuries. They led to the multi-layered structure of the Catholic Church with its “infallible” Pope as the “vicar of Christ,” along with cardinal, bishops, priests, etc.

2. Justin Martyr (100± AD to 165± AD) what he didn't understand in Scripture he allegorized. He also developed the idea of some kind of an intermediate state between heaven and hell. This may have been a carry over from his pre-Christian pagan beliefs because nothing in Scripture can lead one to this conclusion if it is studied carefully. It takes no imagination at all to see here the source of the idea of purgatory, another root of Catholicism.
3. Irenaeus (125± AD - 202± AD) While pastor of Lyons France, he wrote a treatise titled “Against Heresies.” Nevertheless, he supported bishop rule over the many churches, and the validity of tradition beyond what Scripture allows, as well as that there is a real presence of the Body of Christ “the Eucharist.” These again are foundational roots of Catholicism.
4. Clement of Alexandria (150± AD - 230± AD) He further advanced the allegorizing of Scripture, intermingled Plato's philosophies with Scriptural interpretations and advanced the doctrine of purgatory, suggesting that most would eventually be saved from that way station of suffering.

5. Tertullian (155± AD - 255± AD) lived in Carthage on the southern coast of the Mediterranean in what is now Tunisia. Tertullian also believed in the literalness of the Eucharist as being the Body of Christ. He taught that church authority came from apostolic succession. This is probably where the idea of Peter being the first “Pope” started. Widows who remarried became fornicators according to his teachings, and baptism was for the forgiveness of sins. He classified sin into three categories, and believed in the confession of sins to bishops. Quiet sadly, he also taught that there was a time when the Son of God (Jesus) didn’t exist, and when God was not a Father. To this heresy he added that Mary, by her obedience remedied the disobedience of Eve.
6. Cyprian (200± AD -258± AD) He was bishop of Carthage and believed in a church hierarchy, that bishops had authority over pastors, and that they must submit to their bishop. He also supported the efficacy of infant baptism.
7. Origen (185± AD – 254 AD) Origen was persecuted and tortured for his Christian faith by Roman Emperor Decius. Nevertheless he is described by Lutheran historian Mosheim as “a compound of contraries, wise and stupid, judicious and injudicious, the enemy of superstitions, and its patron, a strenuous defender of Christianity, and its corrupter, energetic and irresistible, one to whom the Bible owes much and from whom it has suffered much.” Surely the Bible has suffered much from man, but there is no way that the Bible can owe man anything. Here is a summary of what Origen professed:
 - The Bible is not infallible
 - The early chapters of Genesis are not to be taken literally.
 - Infant baptism is efficacious for salvation.
 - Salvation by works
 - The Holy Spirit may have been created.
 - There is a purgatory but not a literal hell.
 - Man’s souls were preexistent, and perhaps stars and the moon have souls.
 - Jesus was a created being and not eternal
 - There is no bodily resurrection.

- Allegorized the Bible saying “The Scriptures have little use to those who understand them literally.” In this he became one of the fathers of amillennialism. It destroyed the apostolic doctrine of the imminent return of Christ, the literal tribulation and the millennium Kingdom, as well as a literal fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel. What a most dangerous church father he was!
8. Eusebius of Caesarea (270± AD - 340± AD) This man collected Origen’s writings and promoted them. Constantine, the actual founder of the Catholic church, hired Eusebius to produce a Greek New Testaments. It was Constantine who also ended persecutions of Christians, but at the same time encouraged the merging of Christian and pagan traditions many of which remain to this day such as Christmas and Easter. It was also the foundational writings of these “church fathers” where the bases of many omissions in modern Bible versions can be traced, such as Mark 16:9-20 and John 8:1-11. Historian Frederick Malan concluded that Eusebius “suppressed these passages in his edition.” It seems that Volocarrus and Sinoiticus, two manuscripts much revered by modern textual critics are actually copies of his work.
 9. Jerome (340± AD - 420± AD) Jerome was called upon by the bishops of Rome to produce a standard Roman Bible. This became the Vulgate, the official Catholic Bible. This man believed celibacy to be spiritually superior to marriage; in the veneration of holy relics such as the bones of Christians; that saints in heaven hear prayers and intercedes on our behalf; that Mary is instrumental in helping to redeem the human race; and that she remained a virgin. He believed in blessing of water, and justified the death penalty for heretics.
 10. Ambrose (339 AD -397 AD) Ambrose was the bishop of Milan Italy. He had a strong influence on Augustine, and because of his teachings, the Catholic Church made him a saint and a doctor of the church. Here are some of the teachings that made him so revered by the church.
 - He used the allegorical-mystical method of Bible interpretation characteristic of Origen and Phelo.

- He taught that Christians should be devoted to Mary, encouraged monasticism, believed in prayers to the departed saints.
- He believed that the church had the power to forgive sin.
- He believed in transubstantiation.
- He offered prayers for the dead.

11. Augustine (354 AD- 430 AD) Here we have what may be considered to be the official “father of the Catholic church.” He seems to have institutionalized a great many of the major heresies that permeate that church, as well as the Reformation churches. He was a very “worldly” man from a very saintly mother named Monica who prayed for his salvation continuously, even following him to college, and for many more years praying, witnessing, and urging him to repent. Even after he came to believe in Jesus and His work on the cross, he continued for some time, living with his mistress and their son. His motto was “not yet, later,” when it came to changing his ways. When he did finally give up his old ways, he became a zealous disciple, and through his teaching and writings became the major influence of his day in the church. But what a tragic influence he was. As we examine his contributions to the church, we can see a confluence of many of the earlier heresies. Among the doctrines, policies, and traditions that I read somewhere, and that he brought into the “church” and/or to which he added force and legitimacy are as follows. As can be seen this shamefully heretical blasphemous doctrinal structure continues today.

- He was the father and perpetrator of the doctrine of persecution in the Catholic Church. As historian Neander, tells it, “Augustine teachings contain the germ of the whole system of spiritual despotism, intolerance, and persecution, even to the Court of Inquisition.” He himself, integrated persecution against the Bible believing Donatists whose crime was their doctrine to keep a pure church after the example of the Apostles, and not after the perverted doctrines of these “church fathers.”
- Influenced by the earlier church “fathers” he himself is credited as the father of a-millenniumism, allegorizing Bible prophecy, and teaching that the Catholic Church is the kingdom of God.

- He taught that the sacraments provided saving grace.
- He taught that infant baptism took away their sins, and all who rejects this decree be “cursed.”
- He claimed that Mary was sinless, was to be worshipped, and plays a vital role in salvation.
- He believed in purgatory and supported the decree of celibacy for priests.
- He claimed authority of the church over that of the Bible. A quote of his writing included in an apostolic letter dated August 18, 1986 by Pope John Paul stated “I would not believe the gospel unless I were moved to do so by the authority of the Catholic Church.” (How is that for perverted loyalty?)
- He believed that the true interpretation of Scripture was found only in the declarations of the church councils.
- He interpreted the early chapters of Genesis figuratively.
- He taught that God has pre-ordained some for salvation, and others for damnation and that God’s grace is irresistible. Calvin admitted that he derived his TULIP theology directly from Augustine.
- He taught the heresy of apostolic succession from Peter.

Well, there you have it, a short profile of what many so reverently call the valuable legacy of the “early church fathers.” Notice how the heretical influences progressed layer by layer in the sequential recordings of these ancients. From that apparently first “Nicolaitan” seed planted by Ignatius, the monster continued growing larger, finally culminating as part of the false doctrines of Augustine. I cannot help but see this as a fulfillment, in part at least, of the parable of the fig tree and of the leaven in Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:20, 21. From what I have read, the current crop of false teachers and other apostates seem to be dipping into this caldron of heretical poisons, legitimizing them as being vintage truth, all in order to advance the destruction of genuine biblical Christianity.

This stems from the unconscionable false premise that these early “church fathers” somehow had a better grip on biblical truth than is available through simple Spirit-directed scriptural interpretation. A leader of this back-to-the-church father’s movement is Robert Webber a Wheaton College professor. He said, “The early fathers can bring us back to what is common, and help us get behind our various traditions...here is where our unity lies...evangelicals need to go beyond talk about the unity of church to experience it through an attitude of acceptance of the whole church and an entrance into dialogue with the Orthodox, Catholic, and the Protestant bodies.” Notice how he wants to go back to what is “common” with no apparent concern for what is “truth.” When he says “common,” one can simply substitute “Catholicism.” What he says “go beyond talk of unity” that is beyond modern day ecumenism to a total assimilation into that heretical blasphemous institutions.

Who made them church fathers? They may have had many good intensions and insights, but these were all heretics in some respects, as their own words prove! It’s the Catholic Church that has legitimately dubbed them “church fathers,” and indeed they are that for that particular institution, but not as far as biblical truths are concerned. While there may have been early church fathers whose writings expressed God’s truth, I could not find them. If there were, Satan has hid them quite well.

The heretical movement has subdued a disturbingly large number of notable “evangelicals” who are moving toward Rome in the name of “ecumenical unity.” This is not only a merging, as some claim it to be, but a total capitulation, because Rome is not yielding anything. The whole of the Reformation church seem to be crawling back in that den of iniquity from which Luther only partly removed it. One can only wonder about how fully or how solid was the Biblical education and commitment to the whole of the Gospel in the hearts of these ecumenical proponents. If the drive toward unity was an effort to address the comparatively minor doctrinal divisions within the fundamental biblical segments of the various Protestants denominations in the quest for biblically based unity, it would be a God-honoring effort, but as is evident, this is far removed from such a noble cause.

What is under way here is the dismissal of even the little that the reformation accomplished, and a return to Roman Catholicism that may well be the world-wide church predicted to exist when Antichrist arrives. As this process moves to completion, Christianity, that is the remnant of biblical Christian believers, will be widely and mercilessly persecuted for their beliefs. It will be for them, back to the “catacombs,” or to the “lions in the Coliseum.” The currently fashionable seeking the wisdom of the so-called early church “fathers” is nothing more than another way to impress on those weak in biblical Christian understanding, that these are not heresies but legitimate biblical truths. The intentional deception these instigators of ecumenism seek to achieve, is the “common sense” argument that because the early church “fathers” were closer to the origin of the faith, there must be some greater truths to be found in their writing. From the above, it is evident that what we find are the sources of the heresies that helped bring about the corruption the Catholic Church, and some of the very same that led to the Reformation when Luther sought to separate them from that institution.

While the above noted heresies stand as testimonies to the fallibilities of these early fathers, we should not judge them too harshly for this mistake. Many of them might have been faithful saved souls writing what they believed was spirit-led biblical interpretations. I suspect that all past and present spirit-led souls who venture to document their persuasions in writing, are prone to some unfortunate deviations from the truth. Perhaps this can occur at moments of spiritual weakness when the indwelling natural man “butts in” quite stealthily and inserts ideas of his own that go undiscovered in what may otherwise be highly God-honoring documents. Another legitimate excuse for many of the scriptural misinterpretations made by these men is the data from which they worked. Remember they were drawing all their conclusions from their study of handwritten manuscripts, absent the chapter and verse divisions. These were not made until around the twelfth century. They had no Strong’s Concordance or any other assisting devices to even make cross referencing feasible.

The manuscripts were precious and had to be treated most carefully minimizing page ear-marking, underlining or margin noting. There probably were also faulty manuscripts or portions of them that precede these interpretations. Under these circumstances most of them did remarkably well, and not withstanding the mentioned doctrinal mistakes, there are probably many useful insights regarding the early church to be found in their writings. However, it is my opinion that, it's not these insights that these people such as Webber are interested in. The above described deviations from the truth of Scripture are what makes this proposed excursion into their writing most fruitful, because they, as we have seen, almost all promote the heretical doctrines of the Catholic Church. By have been given the "early church fathers" seemingly valid credentials, they have been very persuasive to the biblically deficient regarding the claims of eminency and infallibility of the Roman Catholic Church. Thus the conclusion would be that Catholicism is the real church, and that the Reformation was a mistake that should now be corrected.

One must take off ones hat to Satan in an antithetical sense. He is indeed an extremely clever manipulator and deceiver who never misses an opportunity to corrupt a good cause, or to pervert a noble effort. Remember, he can only be affective in our lives where we are weak in faith and in knowledge of God's Word.

Credit for much of the above must be given to the scholarship of David Cloud as presented in his O'Timothy newsletter. Davis is one of the fearless few faithful disciples of our Lord who speaks unvarnished truths.