

So, today, as you know, we're going to be looking at the early church. And in doing so, hopefully, we will be encouraged in our own Christian lives and moved to greater faithfulness, greater obedience, and greater precision in our knowledge of God. And I know that I enjoy looking at the early church. While in my work I spend a good amount of my time in the New Testament, I also always have a foot in the first couple centuries of the church and I love it. I love seeing how they wrestled with the text of Scripture. I love seeing how they tried to find ways of living faithfully in a culture that was directly hostile. The early church has much for us, and spending time with them usually does good.

But it is worth asking, why study them? Why should we care what the early church said? And even if it acceptable for eccentric academics to study them, what do they have to offer the church? Why are you as a church (or as people from several churches) coming together and devoting this day to looking at the early church? What benefit is there? Why are they important?

That's what I'm going to be trying to address in this first message. For the next few minutes, we're going to look at what good looking at the early church can do for us, and then after that for the rest of the day we'll hopefully get some of that benefit for ourselves by spending time with these saints of the past.

But, before I do that, I want to make the question a bit of a problem. Because I can imagine someone saying, and I have thought of this myself, why should we study church history at all. After all, isn't the Bible what we need to be spending our time on? In fact, isn't the Bible sufficient? Isn't it the *only thing* that we need? And if all that matters is me and my Bible, isn't looking at the early church really a distraction more than anything? Isn't it something *other than* Scripture, and thus unhelpful?

Now I don't want to just dismiss this objection, because it comes from somewhere good. We should value the Bible. The Bible alone is the unique revelation of God. It is inspired. It is authoritative. And none of the other writings of the church are. There is nothing that compares with the Bible. And it is not just a matter of scale. The Scriptures are *qualitatively different*, they are a different type of thing because they are the Word of God in human words. And it's not as if God was unable to say all that He wanted to, so as far as what God tells us we need to know, Scripture is enough. And it alone is the rule of faith. It alone is the standard of Christian belief and action.

So...does that mean we're done here? Does that mean that this entire day conference is misguided and we should pack up and go home?

Not quite.

Because, when we look at that Bible, we find that we are not meant to read it alone. Through Christ, as revealed in the Bible, God established the church. Ephesians 4:7-16:

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says,

"When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,

and he gave gifts to men.”

( In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Again, Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

Again, Hebrews 13:7-9: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.”

So what do we see here in these verses? Well, we see the church working together to teach one another. We see that God has appointed some people within the church particularly as teachers, and has given them gifts to be able to teach sound doctrine effectively. This is the work of God and is necessary for our faith. Further, as members of the church, we are commanded to encourage and teach one another, speaking Scripture to one another and applying it to one another’s lives. On top of all this, we are told to remember those teachers who have passed, not so that we can venerate them as mystical saints, but so that we can continue to learn from them and imitate their teaching and life.

The New Testament’s main model of Bible study is not a person alone. I’d even argue it’s not a single church alone. Meditation and memorisation are good and commended throughout all of Scripture, but the New Testament is remarkably focused on Bible reading and interpretation in the context of the church. We are not supposed to be free floating Christians, ignoring what everyone else says and just pursuing our own idiosyncratic understandings of Scripture. Rather we are to read together, talk together, have a common body of teaching, and have those who can correct us.

And usually, as individuals, if we’re reading the Bible at all, we know this. We know that we are not to neglect meeting together. We know that we need one another to help us both live obediently and to understand rightly. This is the communal, the ecclesial nature of the Christian life. We are one

body, as it often says in the New Testament, and just as a body is not healthy when one goes lopping limbs off, we are not healthy when we are apart from one another.

But, often, we act either implicitly or explicitly like that stops at the walls of our church. We isolate ourselves on the local church level and do not benefit from either the wider church broadly or the church over time. And this is also unhealthy. If we look at the New Testament, we see churches helping each other, sending teachers to each other, cooperating with each other and striving towards the same goal. We see churches in a more or less constant contact. And even in the ancient world, where communication and travel were so much harder and so much slower than they are today, we have good evidence that there was almost constant traffic between the churches around the Roman empire, visiting one another, encouraging one another, and instructing one another. The very books of the New Testament are proof of this, since they were sent and circulated by this relationship that the churches had with one another. So the Bible is clear in that God has given us the church generally, and teachers within the church particularly to help us understand what the Bible says and to help equip us for the work of living in the world as God's people. The Spirit of God works in and through us to bring us to greater understanding and obedience.

And that has always been true. And because that has always been true, it means that we can look back to the faithful of past generations, of *all* past generations —because the Lord will build his church — and benefit from them. The writings of the church fathers, of the early church, are the attempts of our brothers (and in some very rare cases sisters) from long ago to build up the body through reflecting on all that God has done in Christ. They're not perfect, they're not comprehensive, and they are not Scripture, but they are a help and a guide to us in interpreting the Bible and living faithfully in a fallen and hostile world.

So then, hopefully that objection is covered. They are not the Bible, but they are brothers in Christ working along with us to understand what the Bible says and how to live it out. Many of them were wise. Many of them spent a lifetime mulling over the words of Scripture in ways that few people have done since. All of them lived in a world that did not want them to be Christian. And as any other group of Christians, we can learn from them, and we should be glad for the deposit that they have passed down to us.

Then what are these benefits that they give? What do they offer us? What specifically can we look to get out of the rest of today?

Well, while I'm sure there are more, I have four benefits that we'll explore briefly before we dive into the texts themselves. 1. Historical grounded-ness. 2. Learning from their good doctrine. 3. Being inspired by their lived examples, 4. Learning from and avoiding their errors and excesses.

1. Historical grounded-ness.

I mean this in two senses. First, the subjective experience of being a part of a tradition with historical roots, being connected to the past. And second, I mean an objective historical perspective.

The ability to look at the fads and fashions of our day and be able to see them as just that: passing popularities rather than eternal truths.

There is a pattern that has been emerging within traditionally protestant countries recently. An individual begins getting serious about bible study, and then theology. But they find that the protestant culture they are in is thin. Either it's a liberal protestantism that doesn't have any real emphasis beyond just be generically kind to one another, or they find themselves in a theologically shallow evangelicalism that has nothing to say to them beyond an emphasis on personal experience and feelings of relationship. This person feels unsatisfied. They start looking around. They run into some early church theologians. and then the find either the Catholic or Orthodox church. These churches lead with their claim to tradition, their claim to a historic faith. And so this person converts, goes over because they do not want a free floating faith. They don't want a church that was just founded yesterday. They don't want to believe something *new*, but something old, ancient.

And I want to say that there's some good motive there. I think it's followed wrongly, but we should want to have a deep and historically rich faith. It is a problem if no one before us, if no one before the Reformation even, believed what we believe. Christianity is a historically grounded faith, and as such innovation is not a good thing. We want the original gospel. We want the faith of the fathers because that is what the apostles gave to them.

And studying the early church, being familiar with what they say, is a way of having this. What I have in mind, what I want to see, is not a return to Catholicism, because I believe the Reformation was a good and right and necessary thing, what I want to see and what I think is called for is a historically rooted Evangelicalism. We have the same gospel as the fathers. We have the same Jesus as the fathers. We have the same God. We can learn from them. After all, there is a reason why the writings of the Reformers are full of quote after quote from the early centuries of the church. And if we follow their model, we will find ourselves in a deep tradition while able to hold Scripture up as the rule for that tradition. We gain friends and avoid being ruled by them.

And the more we read these early Christian texts, the more the claims of the Catholic church or of the Eastern Orthodox to have the sole ownership of these fathers becomes more clearly false. By spending time with them, we become able to worship along side the saints of the church throughout all history, and this right longing for a faith through time is satisfied.

By the objective historical grounding, I mean that I want us to avoid a danger that every single generation in a culture with a narrative of progress falls into. Every generation is tempted into thinking that now, at long last, we have arrived at the truth. Now we have figured everything out. After generations of darkness, we have finally burst forth into the light. Sometimes that's true. We can learn, we can gain nuance, we can stand upon the shoulders of those who went before and see a little farther, reach a little higher.

But often, we get caught up in the passions of the day. We have blind spots by virtue of where and when we exist, and we do not see what we do not see. Something can make complete sense to one generation that has no real reason for doing so, and that all other generations are immune to.

CS Lewis, the anglican lay-theologian, made this point brilliantly. In his introduction to Athanasius of Alexandria's *On the Incarnation* (A book from the early church worth reading if there ever was one) he says the following:

"Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books. All contemporary writers share to some extent the contemporary outlook – even those, like myself, who seem most opposed to it. Nothing strikes me more when I read the controversies of past ages than the fact that both sides were usually assuming without question a good deal which we should now absolutely deny. They thought that they were as completely opposed as two sides could be, but in fact they were all the time secretly united – united with each other and against earlier and later ages – by a great mass of common assumptions. We may be sure that the characteristic blindness of the twentieth century – the blindness about which posterity will ask, "But how could they have thought that?" – lies where we have never suspected it, and concerns something about which there is untroubled agreement between Hitler and President Roosevelt or between Mr. H. G. Wells and Karl Barth. None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books. Where they are true they will give us truths which we half knew already. Where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill. The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction. To be sure, the books of the future would be just as good a corrective as the books of the past, but unfortunately we cannot get at them."

This is undoubtably true. Along with seeing the same central faith, one of the great joys of reading old Christian books is seeing their differences to us. They do not assume the same world that we do. Sometimes this is to their error when they fall into the Neo-Platonic assumption that matter as such is inferior or evil, but equally often it is to our loss that we do not see the world as quite so full of the clear and unambiguous testimony of God that they saw without trying or looking for it.

So that is what I'm suggesting by saying that being familiar with the early church gives us a historical groundedness. It is both the connection to the past and the clear ocean breeze of the centuries pointing out the errors unique to the day. Next, we can learn from their good doctrine.

This is simple, because we should be eager to learn good doctrine from any Christian who has it. But the early church, especially the first four centuries, is a particularly good place to look for this. Not because they were perfect or understood everything better than we do, often they didn't and they

certainly weren't perfect. But rather, they argued with greater precision and fervour than most anyone does today. Words mattered to them. Precision mattered to them. And they grew in this. What was an acceptable statement in the second century would have been too vague by the fourth. And so when they came to discussing how Jesus is both God and man, or how the three persons of the Godhead remain one undivided essence, they were, or they became, careful and painstaking in their development of terms. They took *centuries* to figure out not what was true, but the right way to say what was true. They developed a whole theological vocabulary for talking about the realities shown to us in the Bible. And in the short amount of time that I've been alive and seeing the trends of Christian doctrine, I can't help but thinking time and time again that so many modern problems would be avoided if instead of trying to figure out things anew all over again, we just looked to what the fathers said and evaluated that.

We do not need to reinvent the theological wheel. And if we try, if we ignore the hundreds of years of inquiry and investigation into the Bible that is there for us, we will only leave ourselves with a weaker, less accurate, less precise, and less true Christianity.

On top of all this, it is just encouraging to see these people express the same beliefs that we have. For example, someone we will spend some more time with later today, Irenaeus of Lyons, wrote around 180 AD. In his book *Against Heresies*, he contrasts the sectarian and local heretics with the world wide church and says:

“But the path of those belonging to the Church circumscribes the whole world, as possessing the sure tradition from the apostles, and gives unto us to see that the faith of all is one and the same, since all receive one and the same God the Father, and believe in the same dispensation regarding the incarnation of the Son of God, and are cognisant of the same gift of the Spirit, and are conversant with the same commandments, and preserve the same form of ecclesiastical constitution, and expect the same advent of the Lord, and await the same salvation of the complete man, that is, of the soul and body. And undoubtedly the preaching of the Church is true and steadfast, in which one and the same way of salvation is shown throughout the whole world.”

Now notice, this is 180 AD, this is before the language of trinity was developed, this was before the detailed descriptions of the incarnation were developed but what do we see? We see the One God in three persons, we see the incarnation of Jesus who gives the Spirit to those who believe in him and who forms the church. We see the same hope of the second coming of Christ and the resurrection of the body along with the soul. And we are told *in 180 AD*, by a man who knew the students of the apostles, by a man from what is now Turkey who was living in what is now France, that this faith was what was held in every church in the known world. This same faith which you and I have today, this same Jesus, was known from India to England and was preached *in the same way* as he is now.

That's encouraging. That's something I want to know. That's a church tradition I'm glad to be a part of.

Third, we can be inspired to imitate their lives.

In the first centuries of the church, it cost you to become a Christian. It was socially dangerous. It could split up your families. It could alienate you from your friends. It could even cost you your life. It was such a socially and culturally risky move that Larry Hurtado of the University of Edinburgh recently published a book with the title of *Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?*

Every single person who became a Christian was doing so with the risk of immense personal loss. And yet they did. And they publicly taught and evangelised and reached out. And it was not uncommon for the authors that we have from the early church to have met an early death at the hands of persecutors. The first great apologist, Justin, carries to this day the title of martyr. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna from whom we have a single letter and student of John was executed in the arena at old age. Ignatius, the most prolific letter writer of the generation after the apostles, was brought from Antioch to Rome in chains in order to then be executed publicly. Even those who did not die were hard pressed for it. Their courage and faith are admirable. And the way they held fast to Christ in the face of immense persecution is a challenge to every one of us. They cared about piety. They cared about obedience, and they were willing to risk everything to stay faithful for Christ.

Shortly after Polycarp was martyred, an account was written recounting his last moments, in it we find the following account set in the arena the day that Polycarp was to die:

And then, as he was brought forward, there was a great uproar when they heard that Polycarp had been arrested. Therefore, when he was brought before him, the proconsul asked if he were Polycarp. And when he confessed that he was, the proconsul tried to persuade him to recant, saying, "Have respect for your age," and other such things as they are accustomed to say: "Swear by the genius of Caesar; repent; say, 'Away with the atheists!'" So Polycarp solemnly looked at the whole crowd of lawless heathen who were in the stadium, motioned toward them with his hand, and then (groaning as he looked up to heaven) said, "Away with the atheists!" But when the magistrate persisted and said, "Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile Christ," Polycarp replied, "For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

But as he continued to insist, saying, "Swear by the genius of Caesar," he answered: "If you vainly suppose that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as you request, and pretend not to know who I am, listen carefully: I am a Christian. Now if you want to learn the doctrine of Christianity, name a day and give me a hearing." The proconsul said: "Persuade the people." But Polycarp said: "You I might have considered worthy of a reply, for we have been taught to pay proper respect to rulers and authorities appointed by God, as long as it does us no harm; but as for these, I do not think they are worthy, that I should have to defend myself before them."

So the proconsul said: "I have wild beasts; I will throw you to them, unless you change your mind." But he said: "Call for them! For the repentance from better to

worse is a change impossible for us; but it is a noble thing to change from that which is evil to righteousness.” Then he said to him again: “I will have you consumed by fire, since you despise the wild beasts, unless you change your mind.” But Polycarp said: “You threaten with a fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you wish.”

I want a faith like that. I want a commitment like that. These early church theologians passed on the traditions of Christ along with their own blood. They did not shrink back. They kept the faith. And they can inspire us to do the same.

Fourth, and last, we can learn from their mistakes.

They were human, and so they were not perfect. Recognising this keeps us from unhealthy obsession with them or an unwavering allegiance to them. They were brave and godly people used mightily by God, but they still were fallen people living in a broken world. And yes, sometimes it is disappointing to see how they made mistakes, but this should lead us to humility. Even otherwise godly and wise Christians can have blind spots.

Often their blind spots were cultural, they often were suspicious towards physical matter, even though they affirmed that God did make it and made it good. They were suspicious towards marriage and put forward types of ascetic celibacy. Sometimes they conceded too much. Sometimes they moralised too much and didn't take the radical grace of the gospel seriously enough. Sometimes their blind spots were exegetical. Because they assumed that a certain way was the right way to read the Bible, especially the Old Testament, they developed interpretations that we would probably not find acceptable today. Almost all of them, certainly, allegorised more than we would be comfortable with. They were neither perfect interpreters nor perfect people.

Just as we need to avoid the mistake of thinking that the early church is useless to us, we also need to avoid thinking that the early church got everything right and was a perfect Christian community. They didn't and weren't. They still had squabbles, they still had mistakes. Not everything was solved forever with perfect clarity by the year 500. But we can see the mistakes they made and we can try to avoid them. We can learn from where they failed. We can build upon them. God has been building his church since the beginning of the gospel, and he is continuing to build it. By being honest with their errors, we can move forward and grow. They are our theological parents and ancestors, we are benefitted by their successes, but we are not bound by their mistakes.

And in this, the errors and flaws of the early church, hopefully cause us to look all the more to Jesus. Tradition doesn't save us, Jesus does. And the tradition is valuable insofar as it helps us to better understand Jesus. Wherever the tradition fails him, wherever the church has fallen short of what God calls it to, we repent of and try to move past as we continue our quest to be faithful to our Lord Jesus in this world that he called us to love and witness to, just as he did to that earliest church.



#### WHAT WE WILL BE DOING THE REST OF THE DAY

- The apostolic fathers and their letters
  - Do we have the same gospel as the earliest church?
  - Focus on: 1 Clement and the letters of Ignatius
- The first Christian apologists
  - How did the early church represent Christianity to a hostile world?
  - Focus on: Epistle to Diognetus and the apologies of Justin Martyr
- Early doctrinal and anti-heretical writings
  - How did the church use its conflicts with heresy to refine and sharpen their central doctrinal teachings?
  - Focus on Irenaeus' Against Heresies.