

Theology of the Church Fathers – Biblical Basics

We need to take a moment before we head into this topic to appreciate the scholarship and challenges of the Church Fathers in relation to their understanding of the Scriptures. For the first century of the Church, none of the Church Fathers had the Bible as we know it today. They had the Old Testament and some letters, stories, and the teachings of the Apostles. Imagine forming everything the people needed to know about the Christian religion from the Old Testament and the stories of the Apostles. This was quite a challenge. As the New Testament formed into the structure we have today, it became easier to remember the story of Jesus and reflect on it. Yet, for the entire age of the Church Fathers they didn't have any of the resources that we have today. They had no commentaries on Scripture to help explain and understand it. They didn't have any histories of the Jewish people or even histories of the 1st century world. It would be like us today trying to guess at the historical context of the Constitution without any historical sources. They didn't have any electronic sources to search for passages, translations, or other sources. They had one translation of Scripture, usually in Greek, from which they derived all their understanding of Jesus and the Christian message. With all this in mind, we can now appreciate their understanding of the Bible and more importantly the system of reading and understanding the Scriptures that they left to us.

Coming to know Jesus:

The most important aspect of biblical study that dominates the writings and teachings of the fathers is that through the Bible they came to know Jesus. The Bible wasn't a set of stories through which we uncover universal truths about humanity and the human condition. The Bible wasn't open to personal interpretations that would lead one closer to God or to feel strengthened by it to endure the challenges of life. These modern approaches to the Bible pale in comparison to the incredible belief held by the Church Fathers that the Bible contained the truths about the nature of God. Their first and principal task was to plumb the depths of Scripture to uncover the deeper truths about God's will, his desire to save the human race, and, most importantly, to understand the nature of his Son whom he sent for our redemption. For this reason, the Bible was the source through which we came to know the nature of God.

In order to come to know God through the Scriptures, the Church Fathers held one fundamental truth: the Bible must be interpreted literally. Until the time of Origin in the 3rd century, no one dared to interpret the Bible with any other idea than the literal meaning of the passage. Let's be clear on what it meant by the "literal interpretation." Many people today claim that they interpret the Bible literally by stating that the Bible should be read as it is with no interpretation. Often these people understand passages of Scripture as isolated passages that interpret themselves based on the person's interpretation. This is the exact opposite way of understanding Scripture compared to the Church Fathers. When the Church Fathers interpreted Scripture literally, it was a challenge. They needed to listen to the passage, understand the intent of the author, and compare it to the other passages of Scripture. No passage was interpreted on its own; everything was held within the unity of all the Bible. Therefore, the literal interpretation required the reader to listen attentively to the passage. Was it a story? Was it a parable? Was it an allegory? Was it law or

teaching? Each passage had a proper mode of interpreting based on the author of the passage and the type of passage.

Why does the literal interpretation matter? The answer is simple: you cannot know God if you can't understand Scripture. St. Jerome is famous for saying "ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." Jesus speaks to us directly from Scripture. Not as our own words or what we want to hear but as his words. As he speaks, he conveys the truth about who he is and what he wants. Our job is to listen. This also applies to the Old Testament. The Church Fathers were very adamant that the Old and New Testaments must be seen as one book with one message. St. Augustine is famous for saying, "The New is in the Old concealed, the Old is in the New revealed." Therefore the Old and New Testaments must be read together as unveiling the same mystery of God and guiding the proper interpretation of both.

The literal interpretation goes one step further. God revealed all things to us through his Son. Outside of Jesus, nothing new will or could be revealed. Jesus is the fulness of revelation and therefore all things can be interpreted in light of this revelation. Whenever the Church Fathers struggled with the interpretation of a passage, it was always brought back into the light of Jesus. How does this passage match with the revelation that came through Jesus? How does this interpretation fit the Christian message? Everything had to match and logically coincide with the fullness of revelation which is Jesus.

Jesus is the center of their biblical interpretation. We may say the same thing today but we don't mean it in the same way as the fathers. Today we interpret Scripture in light of Jesus as though Jesus is speaking to us and giving us the inspiration and guidance we need to persevere through life. When the fathers spoke of Jesus as the center of Scripture, they meant that the fulness of the identity of Jesus can be found in Scripture. Each passage was waiting to reveal the fulness of the mystery of God revealed to us in Jesus. Each passage can only be interpreted in light of the other passages of Scripture. Scripture must be seen as one cohesive whole through which the fulness of Jesus could be revealed to us.

What happens when passages are contradictory or in conflict with one another? The answer to this will depend on who you read. Many of the fathers spent incredible amounts of energy and time synthesizing the whole of Scripture to remove all contradictions and challenges. Some of them seem quite obvious and therefore worth noting. We have four Gospels and not one. Why? The Church Fathers didn't see a contradiction or problem to the inclusion of four Gospels in the Bible. Instead, they taught that the four perspectives add greater depth and clarity to the reality of the revelation of Jesus. What about the "angry" God of the Old Testament vs. the "loving" God of the New Testament? These two ideas were not contradictions to the Church Fathers. They saw the Old Testament not as an "angry" God but as a loving God who showed his love in ways we don't understand and prepared his people for the truth about his love in Jesus. Some of the passages were immensely hard to synthesize into a whole. St. Augustine worked diligently to interpret and find meaning, disparate as some of them may be, to resolve the conflict. Other fathers like Origen was content with contradictions and disparate passages. For Origen, these passages showed the limitation on the human understanding of the mysteries of God. The

inability to synthesize the entirety of Scripture into a cohesive whole was not a serious problem since the truth about the nature of God was still evident in the writings.

To summarize, Scripture revealed to the Church the fulness of the nature of God and his plan for the salvation of the world. Everything we need to know about God's revelation to the world is contained within those books. From those books comes the Christian life. Interpreting, praying with the texts, and coming to know God through them is a major part of the Christian life. Everything that we believe and taught is based on the messages contained within those books. The job of each interpreter is to judge their interpretation based on the tradition of the Church and the revelation of Jesus, the Son of God.

Types of biblical interpretations:

The Church Fathers wrote and spoke on the Bible in many ways. The principal way in which they expounded upon Scripture was through homilies.

Homilies

During the early church, the primary way that the people encountered Scripture and came to understand their truths was through the homilies of the bishops and priests. During Sunday Masses, and eventually throughout the week as well, the bishops and priests would preach to the people as their primary source of educating the faithful. Often people think that these homilies were long and drawn out like modern day Protestant churches. In some cases the homilies ranged between 20 and 30 minutes. Most homilies, however, were relatively short between 10 and 15 minutes. Remember: people have to listen, pay attention, and remember what was said. People only have a limited amount of attention, even back then. These homilies of the Church Fathers were deeply rooted in the Scriptures usually combining many passages together and expounding upon the Old and New Testament. The Church Fathers commonly drew upon real life situations and observations to make their point. The homilies are the easiest of the texts of the early church to read because they were written for a general audience of uneducated people.

Biblical Commentaries

Some of the Church Fathers wrote commentaries on the books of the Bible. Commentaries are long expositions on the meaning of a particular book. For instance, St. Gregory the Great wrote a commentary on the Book of Job bringing out and explaining its main themes. Usually commentaries encompassed all the passages of a given book. These commentaries are great sources of a range of biblical interpretations and insight into the beliefs and teachings of the early church. Commentaries were commonly read by scholars and theologians but sometimes also by wealthy, educated people who could afford them.

Theological expositions/ treatises

The early church was constantly battling some type of theological crisis. These crises were combated or created by the theologians of their era. Some theologians caused the controversies by writing about ideas that were contrary to the faith. In response, other theologians would write works to counter the errors of these other theologians. Sometimes the Church Fathers would

write treatises to explain a topic or expand upon a theme. Although these works might not seem biblical, everything the early church wrote was deeply enmeshed in the bible.

St. Augustine of Hippo

Off in the northern region of Africa, on the southern edge of the Roman Empire, one of the greatest theologians and bishops of the Church, St. Augustine, was born in 354. His father was a pagan and a politician whereas his mother was a very strong Christian who eventually became a saint. Augustine was a brilliant young man with high potential for life in the Roman government or for the scholastics. His parents wanted to support their son's talent and skills but their means were meager and couldn't afford a proper education. A wealthy patron from Thagaste decided to fund for St. Augustine to get a proper education.

Augustine went forth from his homeland of Thagaste to Carthage to begin an education as a politician. His mother warned him to live a good life and stay virtuous while in school. A command he promptly ignored. During his studies, Augustine proved to have a diligent mind with a sharp intelligence. Unfortunately this was coupled with a rebellious attitude. Although he enjoyed his studies in rhetoric, Latin, and politics, he grew a dislike for his Greek professor. He flunked out of Greek, which is why he never learned Greek and could not read the Greek Fathers. During his years in Carthage, he got involved with games, women, and the philosophies of the time. He began to explore each of the current philosophies trying to decide which of them best suited him. Wandering from Stoicism to Manichaeism. Eventually he settled on Manichaeism and stayed in that "religion" for three years.

Now in his early 30's Augustine was on a path to seek deeper truths. Having strayed from the Christian faith, taken a lover on the side, had a child, and now deeply enmeshed in both politics and philosophies, he met the most pivotal figure of his life, St. Ambrose. Ambrose was the bishop of Milan and either an intellectual equal or greater than St. Augustine. Either way, Augustine was perplexed by the teachings of St. Ambrose leading to many discussions and debates on the nature of Christianity.

Ambrose prevailed over Augustine, who was baptized at the age of 33 and began new life as a Christian. Monica, his mother, was immensely pleased. She said that she had been praying for his conversion for years. Augustine took to the new faith with incredible vigor. He said "late have I loved you O beauty ever ancient, late have I loved you."

The vigor never left him. He began to write and teach about the Christian faith developing some of the most clear interpretations and teachings on the Christian faith of the early church. He was eventually ordained and priest and bishop and was set to Hippo where he would spend the rest of his life as a bishop. St. Augustine was one of the most prominent and well-loved bishops of the early Church, His preaching and teachings would draw hundreds if not thousands to listen to him preach. Over his life, he would write 84 works: an autobiography, a major works, and several theological treatises. When the Vandals came upon north Africa in 430, Augustine was already ill. In the aftermath of the sacking of Hippo, St. Augustine died.