

CHAPTER 7

THE SO CALLED “CHURCH FATHERS” – WHO WERE THEY AND HOW DID THEY CONTRIBUTE IN LEADING THE CHURCH AWAY FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT MODEL?

³ *As I urged you when I was going to Macedo'nia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, ⁴ nor to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith; ⁵ whereas the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith. ⁶ Certain persons by swerving from these have wandered away into vain discussion, ⁷ desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions.*

1 Timothy 1:3-7 (RSV)

I want to deal briefly with this issue of the so called “Church Fathers” because they are becoming increasingly fashionable at present and many naïve people are being led astray by the focus placed on these men. I address this theme in some detail in a talk I gave in the teaching series on my Book 3, “How to Study the Bible and why you should”. I recommend that audio talk to you as many have found it helpful.

Let me firstly define what I mean by the phrase “the Church Fathers” as, without an explanation, most will assume I am referring to the apostles who wrote the New Testament and established the Early Church. However, that is not what is meant by the phrase. It refers instead to a series of men who came later from the 2nd to the 5th centuries primarily.

It is claimed by their advocates that these men were “closest in time to the apostles” and therefore their writings carry added weight and should be seen as highly authoritative. I don’t accept that. On the contrary, many of the errors and heresies which contaminated the Catholic church, *and other churches too*, came from these men.

Take, for example, Origen who lived in the 3rd century. It is he who is largely responsible for inventing what is known as the “allegorical” model of interpreting Scripture as I explain in detail in my Book 3. This approach rejects the idea that the Bible means exactly and literally what it says concerning prophecy. They claim that we should instead see a figurative, allegorical or “spiritual” meaning in place of the plain, literal words.

In this way a wide assortment of false teachings have arisen concerning Bible prophecy, which is important because prophecy makes up about 30% of the entire Bible. The confusion is further compounded by the fact that those who believe in the allegorical approach differ enormously on what the alleged “spiritual” meaning is for each passage of prophecy.

That’s because every man is free to think up his own hidden allegorical meaning that he imagines is contained within the text. The one thing they all know for sure is that when it comes to prophecy, the Bible never simply means what it says, as I believe it does.

This man, Origen, is assumed to have enhanced authority and to be credible simply because he lived long ago, at a time close to the founding of the Church. But what never seems to occur to the supporters of Origen and the allegorical school of interpretation is that:

- a) the apostles themselves, the men who wrote the New Testament, were also “close in time to the founders of the Church” - *because they were the founders*. Therefore, why not simply listen to them and allow them to explain themselves in their own words in the pages of the New Testament?
- b) Every form of heresy that has ever existed had already come into existence, at least in its basic form, in the first century, even in the AD 40s and 50s, i.e. during the very lifetimes of the apostles. Indeed, it was to counteract such heresies that many of the letters of the New Testament were written, especially by Paul and John. So, if heresies of every kind were already running rampant in the AD 50s to 90s, why would we assume that men living in the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th centuries were somehow more protected from heresy than we are today in the 21st century?

Another major example of a so called “Church Father” is “Saint Augustine”. The irony is he is claimed as a pillar of the Roman Catholic church, given the huge influence he had on the development of their doctrines. But he is also pointed to as the main inspiration for John Calvin in his establishment of reformed Calvinistic teachings, especially in relation to “predestination” and the denial of the existence of “free will”.

How strange is it that both the Catholic and Calvinist churches should end up pointing to the same man as their hero and inspiration? That alone surely tells you that one is skating on very thin ice relying on anything Augustine said. He is not a hero. At any rate, he is certainly not my hero. He was, instead, a profoundly confused and misguided man and we would do much better if we simply ignored him completely and focused on the Bible.

Indeed, I object to the very phrase “the Church Fathers”. They were not its “fathers” as they lived 100-500 years *after it had already been founded* by the apostles. Therefore, if we are forced to discuss them, a better name would be “the Church great, great, great, great grandchildren”.

Please beware of these men, and of those who espouse them and refer to them in reverential terms in support of their beliefs. Instead, be wise enough to realise that *God wants you to focus on the teachings of the apostles themselves*, in the New Testament, not on what other men later said about them, whatever century they lived in.

You might imagine that everyone would immediately agree with me that the Bible itself is our only totally reliable source document when it comes to formulating our theology. But they don’t. Many people today give equal weight to these so called “Church Fathers” of the 2nd to 5th centuries.

Indeed, many go further than that and effectively elevate these men to an even higher place than the apostles. So, in practice, they would put more weight on what Augustine said than on what Paul said, though they would deny that if directly challenged. However, I have read their books and heard them speak and that is the clear impression they give.

In large part, I think their motive for focusing so heavily on the Church Fathers instead of the apostles is that the teachings of these men agree with their own opinions whereas those of the apostles do not. So, they allude to them because they cannot maintain their arguments by referring only to the Bible as

the writings of the apostles do not support them. But the writings of the so called Church fathers do. If there was ever a warning sign, that is clearly it.

However, it is also largely based on pride, vanity and the craving to appear to be more sophisticated than those of us who rely solely on the Scriptures. In their confused minds they see themselves as being a cut above the likes of me because I only have the Bible, whereas they have the Bible *and the Church Fathers*. That makes them that bit more impressive and fashionable than conventional people like me who focus on the Bible.

Therefore, my advice is to ignore the writings of the so called Church Fathers and of those who advocate them. Anything good or true that they may have to say had already been said by the apostles. Therefore, it isn't needed. And anything extra or different, which was not said by the apostles *was not said for a good reason*.

If God had wanted it to be said and to form part of our doctrines and practices, He would have inspired one of the apostles to write it. The fact that He didn't do so is highly significant and is a clear warning sign for us to steer well clear of such additions. Therefore, leave these men and their teachings well alone.

The writings of these men, which advocate doctrines and practices not found in the Bible, or which exaggerate what the Bible says, as on the issue of God's sovereignty and predestination, are not authentic. They are very similar to the "Traditions of the Elders" which the Pharisees taught and which Jesus rejected and refused to obey.

Be guided therefore by His approach and have the confidence and good sense to focus on the Bible alone. And be wise enough to realise that the mere fact that a book is old does not make it any more likely to be biblical than a book written today. Only the content matters, not the age. If it agrees with the Bible it is true, even if it was written yesterday. If it disagrees with the Bible then it is false, even if it was written 2000 years ago.

If you ever feel yourself being attracted to a teaching or practice because it is presented as being more sophisticated or intellectual than what other people have, then beware. That is a clear indicator that the teaching, or the person advocating it, is using your pride and vanity to ensnare you. There are no circumstances in which we should believe a teaching or adopt a practice in order to sound clever or look impressive. That very motivation alone is a clear warning sign telling you to keep well away from it.

So, never seek to be sophisticated or to appear clever. Don't try to impress anyone at all. Let your only objective be to learn the Bible accurately, for its own sake, because truth matters, and because it is God's Word, not because it might cause other men to be impressed by you. Realising that one simple point alone would save multitudes of people from deception.