

Evangelicalism and Patristic Christianity: 1517 to the present

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KEY WORDS: Early Church, Evangelicalism, Patristics, Reformation, Apostolic Fathers.

It is incontestable that we are living in a time of resurgent interest in early Christianity. Anecdotes abound of evangelical Protestant students visiting a nearby Orthodox or Roman Catholic congregation. We can recall that the late Yale historian of Christianity, Jaroslav Pelikan (1923-2006) – a life-long Lutheran – was received into the Orthodox Church in the closing years of his life. More and more congregations, historically devoid of liturgical trappings, now experiment with Advent candles, sample practices associated with Lent, and mark Good Friday with a ‘Tenebrae’ service.¹

I. The question is – is this current fascination with the early Church really something new for evangelical Christianity?

The majority of voices commenting on this phenomenon fervently believe that it is something new; in their judgment, the swing of the pendulum towards the early Church is a contemporary reaction against an endemic and systemic imbalance which has existed for nearly half a millennium. According to some of these observers, there have been rationalistic developments since the eighteenth century that have cut us off from the early Christian heritage mediated to us by more historic forms of Christianity.² According to others, it is the ‘semi-Manichaeism’ strain introduced into Christianity by the Reformers which has resulted in a retreat from aesthetic and physical aspects of the Christian faith and Christian worship.³ Repeatedly, one finds the embrace of the principle that the guidance of the Apostolic Fathers of the second century is indispensable in the recovery of true New Testament Christianity – which is what evangelicals have

1 I am grateful to friends Dr. J. Ligon Duncan, Dr. Michael A. G. Haykin, and Dr. Ernest Manges, early Church specialists all, for commenting on a preliminary version of this paper.

2 Robert Webber, *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 22; Robert Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 24.

3 Thomas Howard, *Evangelical is Not Enough: Worship of God in Liturgy and Sacrament*, 2nd Edition, (San Francisco: St. Ignatius, 1984), 35.

professedly been seeking all along.⁴

We must be frank in admitting that such writers have reached their conclusions on the basis of perceptions gleaned within the strands of Evangelicalism in which they were nurtured. While this is of foundational importance (they are after all, eyewitnesses of the movements of their lifetimes), yet it is also limiting. Their judgments have involved a readiness to extrapolate from the evangelical movement as they have experienced it to the whole of it. And such an approach contains a rather wide margin of error. Evangelicalism sampled or experienced in one region cannot be simply equated with the global evangelical movement or even with evangelical movements elsewhere in the English-speaking world. It is possible therefore that the neglect of early Christianity which is complained against – for example in North America – exists primarily there and primarily in the environs of fundamentalist or parachurch Protestantism.⁵

Now in fact there is evidence to suggest that fundamentalist or parachurch Protestant Christianity has not been the only variety of Christianity which has neglected the early Church. Extremely liberal segments of Protestant Christianity in the twentieth century – those which allowed to be called into question the virginal conception of Jesus, his physical resurrection three days after death and his personal return at the end of this age – cannot be thought to have taken very seriously the early ecumenical councils or the theological consensus of early Christianity. It is interesting that this is the exact complaint raised by the former evangelical Anglican (and now Antiochean Orthodox priest) Michael Harper, of his former communion, the Church of England.⁶ He witnessed what he believed to be the erosion of foundational doctrines in that communion and, looking for a safer harbor, claimed to find it in the Antiochean expression of Orthodoxy. I suggest therefore that the charge of early Christianity's neglect is a more complex phenomenon than this popular literature (chiefly of American origin) admits. The examples of the Harpers and the Pelikans of the Christian world should keep us from attributing all the driving force in the contemporary trend under discussion to the 'blind spots' of evangelical Protestantism. The complexity of

4 See this especially in Peter E. Gilquist, *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith*. Revised edition (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 1992), 34-40. See the same emphasis in Webber, *Canterbury Trail*, 61, and Howard, *Evangelical is Not Enough*, 107.

5 This was the contention of the respected evangelical church historian, Geoffrey W. Bromiley in an essay 'The Promise of Patristic Theology' published in Pinnock and Wells (eds.), *Towards a Theology for the Future*, 125.

6 Michael Harper's *The True Light: An Evangelical's Journey to Orthodoxy* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997) is a fascinating account. Certain parallels suggest themselves in relation to the story of Pelikan (supra). It is stimulating to consider, when reading these books in combination, that the theologically broad Anglicanism which Harper fled in search of historic Christianity is the very nexus in which Webber claimed to find it. In Howard's case, theologically broad Anglicanism was only a stopping-off point on his journey from a fundamentalist upbringing on the way to an eventual embracing of Roman Catholicism.

our contemporary upsurge of interest in early Christianity therefore requires a different line of explanation than what has been offered. I propose that that line of explanation ought to be that...

II. The current resurgence of interest in early Christianity is *not* a swing of the pendulum towards something neglected for the five centuries of Protestantism's existence. It is in fact a return to emphases *regularly* present in historic Protestantism

Those propounding the view that Protestantism has systematically neglected the early Church have relied on observations drawn from within their life spans. In what follows, we will depend on a series of vignettes drawn from the past five centuries; we must be selective, because there is an embarrassment of riches in illustrative material.

1. Twentieth Century

Among the welcomed emphases of the 'new Evangelicalism' of the 1940s and 50s was a rebirth of interest in the theology of early Christianity. Thus, a collection of Evangelical Theological Society essays, published in 1957 as *Inspiration and Interpretation*, featured essays on Irenaeus and Augustine; another collection, published in 1971, and entitled *Towards a Theology for the Future*, featured an essay entitled 'The Promise of Patristic Theology'.⁷ Both were encouraging developments, given what had preceded for several decades. Beyond evangelical Protestantism, was not the issuing of the joint Westminster Press / S.C.M. Press 'Library of Christian Classics' series in 1956 (including nine volumes representing the early Church) itself a manifestation of the same renaissance of interest? Thomas Torrance's *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (1948), H.E.W. Turner's *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption* (1952), J.N.D. Kelly's *Early Christian Doctrines* (1958) were, at their first publication, a part of this same mid-century revival of interest. Yet all of these welcome developments came after a

⁷ John F. Walvoord (ed.), *Inspiration and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957). David F. Wells and Clark H. Pinnock (eds.), *Towards a Theology for the Future* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1971). Noteworthy also in the 1950s era was the translation by Gleason Archer of *Jerome's Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958). The important expatriate British church historian, Geoffrey W. Bromiley has done as much as any other resident North American evangelical leader to encourage this re-orientation to Patristic studies. In addition to his contribution to the Wells and Pinnock volume (supra) he also contributed an important essay, 'The Church Fathers and Holy Scripture' in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (eds.), *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 199-224. I am indebted to a friend, Dr. Ernest Manges, for the Gleason Archer reference. In recognizing Bromiley's role, it is only proper to also mention two evangelical scholars who have furthered this reorientation as Patristics specialists: the late D. F. Wright of Edinburgh University and Everett Ferguson of Abilene (Texas) Christian University have properly enjoyed a reputation extending beyond Evangelicalism.

nearly forty-year hiatus in Patristic interest. The reasons for this hiatus cannot be explored here; but it is sufficient to note that to whatever extent conservative Protestants were guilty of neglecting Patristic Christianity during these decades, they were far from alone in this neglect.

Yet, even while this temporary suspension of interest in early Christianity was in effect, there was an exception within evangelical Protestantism. Should we be surprised to discover that early twentieth century Pentecostal statesman, Donald Gee (1891-1966), already in 1928 was probing second century Montanism so as to determine its relationship to early Christian orthodoxy?⁸

2. Nineteenth Century

From the distance of a century, our supposition might easily be that the late Victorians had reasons to neglect the early Church, living as they did in the age of a newly-assertive papacy⁹ and the catholicizing tendencies of the Oxford movement, which continued its influence in Protestantism long after the actual 1845 re-affiliation to Rome of one its premier leaders, John Henry Newman.

But such a hypothesis is not supported by the data. In just such a setting emerged the standard volume by J. F. Bethune-Baker, *Early History of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge, 1903);¹⁰ this volume had a half-century of influence until the publication of the J. N. D. Kelly volume (mentioned above) in 1958. Two major histories of early Christianity were produced by Anglican authors in this same dawn of the century period: that of B. J. Kidd (1922) and H. M. Gwatkin (1909).¹¹ An Anglican author better known because more widely consulted by evangelical Protestants, H. B. Swete, provided volumes on the *Holy Spirit in the Ancient Church* (1912) and *Patristic Study* (1902). Also of note in this period was an important volume, *Persecution in the Early Church* by the Methodist scholar, H. B. Workman (1906).

8 Donald Gee, 'Montanism' in *Redemption Tidings* (Dec. 1928), 5, 6. I am indebted to the website, www.earlychurch.org.uk for providing this article in pdf. file. It may well be that the writings of Stanley Burgess and of Ronald Kydd later in the twentieth century are only the continuation of this early twentieth century Pentecostal curiosity. The former has provided volumes on the Holy Spirit in the *Ancient Christian Traditions* (1984) and *Eastern Christian Traditions* (1989) while Ronald Kydd authored *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church* (1984, rev. 1994). All were published by Hendrickson of Peabody, MA.

9 Late Victorian Protestantism recoiled especially at the Decree on Papal Infallibility which was presented in the Vatican Council of 1870. See the text in Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 288.

10 Bethune-Baker was subsequently professor of Divinity at Cambridge from 1911-1935.

11 I do not intend to suggest that these authors belong to broad Evangelicalism; yet their works have proved of use to this wider movement. B. J. Kidd, *History of the Church to 461* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922) and H. M. Gwatkin, *Early Church History to 313* (London: Macmillan, 1909).

Four pre-Great War Presbyterian theologians, B. B. Warfield, T. M. Lindsay, James Orr, and Robert Rainy provided volumes reflecting their own researches into the theology of the early Church. Many have at least handled Warfield's compiled essays entitled *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine*.¹² T. M. Lindsay delivered as Cunningham lectures in the Scottish university divinity faculties material which became *The Church and Ministry in Early Centuries* (1902).¹³ James Orr was one of two Scots Presbyterians who wrestled with questions regarding the development of doctrine from early Christian times; Orr's volume (an intentional rejoinder to the massive work of Adolf von Harnack) was the still-valuable *The Progress of Dogma* (1902). Similarly, Robert Rainy, principal of New College, Edinburgh in addition to authoring the still-valuable *Delivery and Development of Christian Doctrine* (1874), a rejoinder to the John Henry Newman volume, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), also left a very creditable volume, *The Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh, 1902), which was remarkable for its readiness to evaluate theological developments in the first four centuries of the Christian faith. Many of these volumes served as school texts for broadly-evangelical students in divinity.

In the same 'fin de siècle' era appeared the four-volume series, co-edited by the Anglican evangelical, Henry Wace (1836-1924), *The Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature to the End of the Sixth Century* (1911). Wace, at one time professor of Ecclesiastical History in the University of London, showed the breadth of his interests by on the one hand helping to edit the series, *Shorter Writings of Luther*, and on the other, to co-edit (with Phillip Schaff of Union Seminary, New York) the series 'Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers' (1887-1900) – still in such widespread use in the English-speaking world. That series had consciously augmented another, the 'Ante-Nicene Fathers', originating with the Edinburgh publisher, T. & T. Clark. In this instance, we know that part of the impetus for the launching of this Edinburgh series under the co-editorship of Alexander Donaldson and James Robertson in 1860 was the concern that the Oxford Movement (which gave rise to the defections of Newman and others to Rome) was creating the misperception that Christianity prior to the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. necessarily told in favor of Catholic expressions of the faith. It is noteworthy that this major publishing undertaking proceeded on a very different assumption: that the early Church prior to the Nicene era was not the exclusive

12 The volume of gathered essays appeared in the Oxford University Press *Works of B. B. Warfield*, 10 volumes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929ff.) edited by Ethelbert D. Warfield. The Orr volumes referred to are *Neglected Factors in the Study of the Progress of Early Christianity* (New York: Armstrong, 1899) and *The Early Church: Its History and Literature* (New York: Armstrong, 1901). Though concerned with more than the Patristic period, the *History of Doctrine* by Union Seminary, N.Y. theologian, W. G. T. Shedd, 2 volumes, (New York: Scribner, 1864) and the *History of the Christian Church* authored by his historian colleague, Philip Schaff, 12 volumes, (New York: Scribner, 1883-93) show considerable skill in treating the Patristic period.

13 (New York and London: Armstrong, 1902)

property of any particular branch of the church and was therefore awaiting the inspection of all modern Christians.¹⁴ There was a clear confidence that wider familiarity with pre-Nicene Christianity would promote open-minded thinking about such questions.¹⁵ We cannot survey this period without acknowledging the impact made by J. B. Lightfoot's edition and translation of the *Apostolic Fathers* (1869, 1885) or the freedom with which the popular Anglican commentator, J. C. Ryle (1816-1900), later first Bishop of Liverpool, drew on various Patristic commentators in his seven-volume series, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*.¹⁶

The Ante-Nicene Library series was not, after all, the first Protestant effort at translating the early Church Fathers in the nineteenth century. This honor belongs to the series, *The Library of the Fathers*, edited by the Oxford professor of Hebrew, E. B. Pusey (1800-1882). The fact that John Henry Newman had been associated with the launch of this series in 1838, and that his re-affiliation to Rome in 1845 meant an end to his involvement in the project, ought not to obscure the fact that the motivation behind this series of Patristic translations was not the advancing of any particular Roman agenda, but the containing of an incipient Protestant liberalism which was raising its head in early Victorian Oxford. The latter unfolded in connection with the liberal theological influence there of Professor Renn Dickson Hampton (1793-1868) whom the early Tractarian leaders had come to view with great alarm.¹⁷

3. Eighteenth Century

In the previous century, the eighteenth, there was also high interest in the early

14 The intriguing story of the launch of the T. & T. Clark *Ante-Nicene Fathers* series in 1860, its financial backing from sugar-refiner, Robert Macphie (also a major backer of the launch of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846), and its eventual strained relationship with the American publishers of the enlarged American series edited by A. Cleveland Coxe is expertly told by David F. Wright, "From a Quarter So Unexpected": translation of the Early Church Fathers in Victorian Scotland', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 30 (2000), 124-69. Wright acknowledged his own debt to Richard W. Pfaff, 'Anglo-American patristic translations 1866-1900', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 28 (1997), 39-55.

15 Representative of this heightened curiosity in early Christianity in mid-nineteenth century western Europe is the volume of the Ulster Presbyterian church historian, W. D. Killen (1806-1902) *The Ancient Church: Its History, Doctrine and Worship Traced for the First Three Hundred Years* (New York: Scribner, 1859). The French evangelical Protestant, Edmond de Pressensé, had in the same period composed a four-volume series *The early years of Christianity* (1859; E.T. London: Hodder, 1880ff.)

16 It is especially instructive to note concerning Ryle, so often associated with opposition to the Tractarian legacy of the Oxford Movement which was spreading in late nineteenth century Anglicanism, that his use of such Patristic commentators as Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, Chrysostom, Augustine, Theophylact and Euthymius is widespread in his *Expository Thoughts*. There was evidently no 'odium by association'. See for example his *Expository Thoughts on John*, Vol. I, (London: William Hunt, 1879), xi.

17 Richard W. Pfaff, 'The Library of the Fathers: The Tractarians as Patristic Translators', *Studies in Philology* 70 (1973), 329-44.

Church – though the materials of the Church Fathers had yet to be made available to the wide readership they would gain through the various nineteenth-century translation projects. A major milestone came at century's end with the gradual release of Joseph Milner's multi-volume *History of the Church of Christ* (1794-97).¹⁸ Milner aimed to overcome the shortcomings of another church history; it was widely perceived that the German church history so widely available in translation in the eighteenth century, J. L von Mosheim's *Institutes of Church History* (1755, ET 1768), spent too many pages detailing various early heresies. Milner, an Anglican evangelical, wished to demonstrate the tenacious survival of the doctrine of justification by faith from the earliest centuries. He must have made the story interesting for early nineteenth century readers, for one such (John Henry Newman) recalled while writing his memoir, the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864), that it was Milner who had 'nothing short of enamoured him with long extracts' from the Church Fathers.¹⁹ Milner's more comprehensive effort had been anticipated, in degree, by the earlier efforts of fellow-Anglican evangelicals John Newton and Thomas Haweis.²⁰

In that eighteenth century, some teaching of the early Church was being put to polemical usage. Early in the century, liberal (or as they were then called, 'Latitudinarian') Anglican theologians were becoming aware, by their reliance on seventeenth century Remonstrant theologians – notably Gerard Jan Voss (1577-1649) and Philipp van Limborch (1633-1712) – that there were certain non-Augustinian Church Fathers whose views of human depravity and of the redemption wrought by Christ tended to undermine the emphases of the eighteenth century evangelicals – whether Reformed, Anglican or Wesleyan.²¹ This polemic, articulated by a series of liberal Anglicans commencing with Daniel Whitby (1638-1726) and extending through George Tomline, bishop of Winchester (1750-1827),²² required that a whole range of evangelical writers would need

18 I have consulted the five-volume edition of 1827, brought to completion by Isaac Milner, brother to Joseph.

19 The reference by Newman is to his reading material at age fifteen! See *Newman's Apologia Pro Vita Sua: The Two Versions of 1864 & 1865*, ed. Wilfrid Ward, (London: Oxford University Press, 1911), 110.

20 The story surrounding the production of Milner's work is effectively told by John Walsh in his 'Joseph Milner's Evangelical Church History', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 10 (1959), 174-87. A. Skevington Wood provides a similar sketch of the work of John Newton in, 'John Newton's Church History', *Evangelical Quarterly* 23 (1951), 51-70.

21 These seventeenth-century developments so heavily impacting eighteenth-century Christianity are well described in Norman Sykes, *From Sheldon to Secker: Aspects of English Church History 1660-1768* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), chap. v.

22 This theological criticism of the evangelical Protestant position, informed by Patristics, is illustrated, for example in Daniel Whitby's *A Discourse Concerning the True Import of the Words 'Election' and 'Reprobation'* (London, 1710), 96-109. and George Tomline's *A Refutation of Calvinism* (London, 1811), chap. v. Tomline openly quotes Whitby from the preceding century.

to meet such criticisms, informed by the writings of the early Church Fathers, on their own ground. The principle the evangelicals upheld was that the early Church formed an important, but not utterly determinative witness on theological questions. Evangelical theological writers such as John Edwards (1637-1716), Thomas Haweis (1734-1820) and Thomas Scott (1747-1821) upheld their essentially Augustinian position by maintaining a stance which, while it welcomed Patristic authorities, declined to be bound by them. Then, as now, the Apostolic Fathers of the second century were being utilized to insist that the evangelical claim to represent the original Christianity of the New Testament era was tenuous. Thomas Scott, knowing this, argued:

Can the language of Justin Martyr regarding baptismal regeneration be paralleled from any record of baptism in the New Testament?...If Justin corrupted Christianity by philosophy, are we bound to bow to him as an oracle or copy him as an example, merely because he lived in the second century?²³

Nonconformity seems not to have been at a disadvantage, as regards Patristic learning, if the *Body of Divinity* (1767) of the London Baptist minister, John Gill (1697-1771) be taken as a sample. Particularly in his treatment of the divine attributes, Gill demonstrates a very wide classical as well as Patristic learning. Given his loyalty to high Calvinism, it is not surprising to find numerous quotations from Augustine of Hippo; yet in addition we find Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Jerome, Gregory of Nazianzen, and Cyril of Jerusalem.²⁴

But while this readiness to test the teaching of early Christianity by Scripture (a habit of mind transmitted forward from the Reformation of the sixteenth century) was so characteristic of eighteenth-century evangelicals, there unfolded alongside this a most refreshing readiness to borrow from early Christianity a range of ideas and practices deemed useful for the age. Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), recovered many interesting ideas from the early Church, a number of which, such as end-of year Watchnight services and love-feasts, were passed on to Methodism. Moreover, Zinzendorf, leader of the Moravians, further demonstrated his familiarity with the early Church when he drew on episodes in the life of the early missionary, Martin of Tours (335-400), while preaching about the 'wounds of Christ' (a Moravian hallmark). Just as Martin had been ready to dismiss as hellish a vision of an unscarred Christ who promised to show to him *alone* a sight of his own glory (prompting in Martin the question 'but where are your wounds?'), so (argued Zinzendorf) the gospel is brought to nothing without the message of a crucified savior.²⁵

23 Thomas Scott, *Reply to Bishop Tomline's 'A Refutation of Calvinism'* (London: Macintosh, 1817), 276, 690.

24 John Gill, *A Body of Divinity* 2 vols. (London: 1767 reprinted Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978), I. 109, 154, 183, 225, 226-27

25 Ludwig von Zinzendorf, 'Concerning The Proper Purpose of Preaching the Gospel', reprinted in Francis M. DuBose (ed.), *Classics of Christian Missions* (Nashville: Broadman, 1979), 294.

John Wesley (1703-1791) was himself a student of the early Church. The self-imposed austerities he endured while a member of the 'Holy Club' at Oxford, were largely austerities pursued in search of a 'Primitive Christianity' associated with the ancient *Apostolic Constitutions*.²⁶ Later in his career, while not allowing that singleness should be made a condition of ministry in the church, he regularly urged the single life on his band of young preachers (even after he took the plunge and married). He maintained fasts twice per week and encouraged other Methodists to do the same.²⁷ Wesley drew on the literary resources of the early Church when compiling his fifty-volume 'Christian Library'; he commenced the series in 1750 with a volume providing various letters of the Apostolic Fathers and the sayings of Macarius, a fourth century bishop of Jerusalem.²⁸ Volumes two through four provided an abridged martyrology commencing with early Christian times, courtesy of the Elizabethan chronicler, John Foxe (1516-1587).²⁹

4. The Seventeenth Century

In this century, the challenge faced by the heirs of the Reformation tradition was the emergence of stronger evidence of the diversity of Christian teaching after the death of the Apostles than had ever been observed since the introduction of the printing press. Beginning in the 1630s, attention had come to be focused on the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. The *Epistles of Clement* were published at Oxford in 1633; a debate about the authenticity of the *Epistles of Ignatius* raged until 1644. The study of second-century Christianity was at this time largely a novelty. Some Post-Reformation Protestants, on reading this literature of the second century, found reasons to consider whether an Episcopal church order was not of greater antiquity than earlier assumed; many learned to look behind and beyond Augustine, their erstwhile authority of choice in Christianity's early centuries.³⁰ The undermining or qualifying of Augustine's hitherto dominant theological role was also a major subtext in that challenge to high Calvinism which has subsequently been called Arminianism.³¹

Yet this is only half the story and the half, we may say, on hearing which our modern ears most prick up. The other half is that conventional Protestantism both in Europe and Britain, set to work in this century in an honest attempt to grapple with the Church Fathers taken as a whole. It was the seventeenth cen-

26 Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Trinity Press, 1989), 90.

27 David Butler, *Methodists and Papists: John Wesley and the Catholic Church in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995), 71, 72.

28 Butler, *Methodists and Papists*, 74, with full details of the contents of the Christian Library available from the Wesley Archive maintained online by Northwest Nazarene University, Nampa, ID. See http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/christian_library/index.htm

29 Of whom, more below under the heading 'The Sixteenth Century'.

30 Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 218

31 Ibid. 220.

ture, rather than the preceding century of Reformation, which got down to work to prepare volumes of 'patrology', i.e. volumes seeking to interpret the theological diversity and development of the earliest Christian centuries. The earliest attempts, such as those by the Heidelberg Protestants, Abraham Scultetus (1566-1624) in 1598³² and Daniel Tossanus (1541-1602) in 1603,³³ the English writer (and Oxford librarian) Thomas James (1573-1629) in 1611,³⁴ and French Protestants, André Rivet (1572-1651) in 1619,³⁵ and Jean Daillé (1594-1670) in 1632³⁶ – though of quite mixed quality – were one and all attempts to move beyond the somewhat 'atomistic' quotation of Patristic writers which had too much characterized both Catholic and Protestant polemical appeals to this material in the sixteenth century.³⁷ In these literary attempts, there emerges a trend toward modern critical study of the Fathers. While some of the volumes attempt to 'sort' the Fathers (by indicating which of them most helpfully or 'soundly' articulate a particular topic or doctrine), there is a progression towards understanding the development of thought, over time, in the writings of particular Patristic authors and towards the discerning use of the whole body of literature.³⁸

Yet to emphasize only this about the seventeenth century would be to leave the false impression that Patristic study was something considerably removed from the week-in week-out practice of pastoral ministry and proclamation. In fact, proclamation in this period seems to have shown a remarkable readiness to allude to the Church Fathers for sermon illustration or for a suitable 'bon mot'. In his sermonic expositions of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, the Puritan

32 Scultetus had released the contents of the eventual, posthumously published volume *Medulla Theologiae Patrum Syntagma* (Frankfurt: 1634) in installments commencing in 1598.

33 Whose *Synopsis de Patribus* (Heidelberg, 1603) appeared in English translation in 1637 as *Synopsis of the Fathers*.

34 This was *Treatise of the Corruption of Scripture, Councils and Fathers by Prelates, Pastors and Pillars of the Church of Rome for the Maintenance of Popery and Irreligion*.

35 *Critici Sacri Specimen: hoc est censurae doctorum* (Dordrecht: 1619).

36 *Traité de l'employ des saints pères*. An English translation was published in London in 1675 as *Treatise Concerning the Right Use of the Fathers*.

37 I am indebted to the masterful survey of this seventeenth-century literature provided by Irena Backus, 'The Fathers and Calvinist Orthodoxy: Patristic Scholarship' in Irena Backus (ed.), *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, Vol. 2, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), 839-65. See also the companion essay, by Jean-Louis Quantin, 'The Fathers in 17th Century Anglican Theology' in *ibid.*, 987-1008.

38 *Ibid.*, 858, 859. It is the contention of D. H. Williams, 'Scripture, Tradition and the Church: Reformation and Post-Reformation', in D. H. Williams (ed.), *The Free Church and the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 105, 118-123, that whatever enhancements in Patristic study may have been achieved in the seventeenth century, it was not accompanied by the respect for authoritative tradition characteristic of the early Reformation period. The Reformed theologians Wollebius and Turretin and the Lutheran theologian, Chemnitz are said to represent this development.

preacher Thomas Watson (d. 1686) called on the services of Chrysostom, Cyprian, Bernard, Augustine, Tertullian, and Augustine to assist him in making plain what it is to 'glorify God and enjoy him forever' and to take the Scriptures as the rule towards the pursuit of this.³⁹

5. The Sixteenth Century

The century of the Reformation is full of paradoxes as we pursue this question – i.e. what was the orientation of Protestantism towards the Church Fathers? On the one hand it may be said comprehensively that the various forms of Protestantism, because more leavened by the Christian humanist orientation towards Christian and classical antiquity than then-contemporary Catholicism (which had fewer fundamental quarrels with medieval theology and philosophy) took late-medieval Catholicism off-guard. As regards this epoch, the Catholic scholar, Ralph Keen has written:

The rediscovery of Christian antiquity and its appropriation by the reformers forced Roman Catholicism to reclaim a heritage of which it had not consciously been the custodian. The need to prove a positive relationship between the catholic church and the patristic tradition was thus as difficult as it was urgent.⁴⁰

Protestant Reformers such as Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and John Calvin (1509-1564), just because they were part of the Christian humanist movement of the Renaissance era prior to their acceptance of the message of the Reformation, were already highly conversant with Patristic literature. By the year 1516, Zwingli owned the printed works of Ambrose, Athanasius, Augustine, Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, Cyprian, Cyril of Alexandria, John of Damascus, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, Lactantius, Origen and Tertullian.⁴¹ Oecolampadius of Basle (1482-1531) caught the attention of serious scholars across Europe in 1529 when he published a study calling into question medieval Catholic transubstantiation doctrine in light of many writings from the early Church.⁴² John Calvin's first-ever literary production had been a commentary on a treatise by the Roman jurist, Seneca;⁴³ the preface to the first edition of his *Institutes*

39 Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (1692, reprinted London: Banner of Truth, 1965), chap. I.

40 Ralph Keen, 'The Fathers in Counter-Reformation Theology in the Pre-Tridentine Period' in Backus (ed.), *Reception of the Fathers*, Vol. 2, 702.

41 Irena Backus, 'Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer and the Church Fathers' in Backus (ed.), *Reception of the Fathers*, Vol. 2, 628-39.

42 Oecolampadius' treatise, *Quid de eucharistia veteres tum Graeci, tum Latini senserint, Dialogus* (Basel, 1529) was highly significant, especially in England where it was read by persons as diverse as John Fisher, Catholic bishop of Rochester, the future Henrician martyr John Frith, and eventually Reformation bishops Cranmer and Ridley.

43 Johannes Van Oort, 'John Calvin and the Church Fathers' in Backus (ed.), *Reception of the Fathers*, Vol. 2, 663. On the whole question of Calvin and the Patristic age, see also A.N.S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

(1536) entailed the claims that ‘the doctrines of Rome are contrary to the teaching of the early Church and... that the teaching of the Reformers is in fact very close to that of the “ancient writers of a better age of the Church”’.⁴⁴ Witnessing a public theological debate at Lausanne in 1536, Calvin – who had planned only to observe – was stung into action by the Catholic claim that the Protestants lacked Patristic support. From memory, he quoted copiously from the Fathers and reversed the direction of the debate.⁴⁵ It was this humanist pre-disposition to prefer the teaching of Christian antiquity rather than the teaching of the church in an age of decay (the onset of which coincided, roughly speaking, with the sack of Rome in 410 or, at very least the papacy of Gregory the Great, circa 590-604) that separated such early Protestants from current Catholic theology, which viewed Christian theology as an unbroken continuum from antiquity to the present. Such a Protestant stance had been ‘served up whole’ by the humanistic studies of the day.⁴⁶

Yet on the other hand, there were prominent Protestant leaders who came to their appreciation of Christian antiquity having traveled a distinctly different road. For Martin Luther (1483-1546) and Martin Bucer (1491-1551), their own theological training had oriented them toward late medieval Catholic theology – *rather than* the Church Fathers – and it was only gradually that they learned to use the early Church as a tool for critiquing the contemporary Church. Further, while the Protestant Reformers learned to use the early Church to critique the contemporary Church, they did so selectively – for they rapidly learned to admit that the early Church was not univocal. Catholic theology might have preferred the notion that there was an unbroken continuum of teaching from the second century through to the sixteenth (a view extremely difficult to demonstrate); but the sixteenth century Protestants, preferring the early Church, needed to gauge the Church Fathers critically. At a fairly early stage in the age of Reform, Martin Bucer could claim on a title page:

Here, Christian reader, you will see that we have admitted nothing in the doctrine or rites of our churches which is not in fine harmony with the writings of the Fathers and the observances of the Catholic church.⁴⁷

But with the passage of time, each such Reformation leader knew that the early Church provided authorities on both sides of many questions. Calvin found support for the Protestant doctrine of justification in Augustine, Ambrose, and

44 Van Oort, ‘John Calvin and the Church Fathers,’ 665. Van Oort here quotes the 1536 *Institutes*.

45 Van Oort, ‘John Calvin and the Church Fathers,’ 672.

46 The Reformation (including the perspective of Anabaptists) attitude toward the Church Fathers is helpfully surveyed in D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), chap. 6.

47 The quotation, from the title page of the 1534 polemical title, *Defensio adversus Axioma Catholicum*, is provided in Cornelis Augustijn, ‘Bucer’s Theology in the Colloquies with the Catholics, 1540-41’ in David F. Wright (ed.), *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 119.

Bernard – a very short list!⁴⁸ Luther found in writing his *Galatians* commentary, that Jerome's exposition of the critical second chapter (dealing with controversy between Paul and Peter at Antioch) was skewed by Jerome's pre-commitment to Petrine primacy, whereas Augustine was the saner interpreter.⁴⁹ It emerged, therefore that the Protestants found in the early Christian theologians and commentators invaluable resources – yet all the same resources auxiliary to a Scripture to which they awarded supreme authority. It has been well said that the Reformers used the Fathers to 'test' or evaluate the plausibility of their own convictions; but this is very far from admitting that they accepted them as a judge.

It would not be proper to speak of the sixteenth century and not mention its Protestant chroniclers such as the Lutheran, Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520-1575) who guided a composite project of thirteen volumes (one for each Christian century through the thirteenth) which we now call the *Magdeburg Centuries* (1559-1574); this demonstrated the ill-fortunes of a Western Christendom which had been dominated by the Roman papacy. A second chronicler, the Anglican John Foxe (1516-1587), had helped correct the page proofs of these *Centuries* while a religious refugee at Basel in the reign of Queen Mary Tudor (1553-1558).⁵⁰ Even though we know his *Acts and Monuments* as an eight-volume colossus, for our present purpose it is important to grasp that whether in its Elizabethan bulk or in the digested Victorian single-volume versions, Foxe gave lengthy attention to early Christian martyrdoms up to the year 449 A.D.⁵¹ In this way, he gradually helped to make the early Christian martyrs what we might call 'household names'. Foxe in this lighter dress was a fixture on the bookshelves of many Protestant families well into the twentieth century; this by itself is a powerful indicator that the early Church was not utterly eclipsed in the ecclesiastical and theological divisions of the early twentieth century.

III. To sum up

As one considers the prevalent fresh appropriation of early Christianity in our own time, one finds on closer inspection that the evangelical Protestant tradition, rather than exhibiting a history of neglect, has often been exemplary in investigating and appropriating early Christian theology and practice. The history of Evangelicalism is in fact full of salutary lessons and models which can guide

48 See the *Institutes* III. xi. 23 – xii.3

49 Manfred Schulze, 'Martin Luther and the Church Fathers' in Backus (ed.), *Reception of the Fathers*, Vol. 2, 600-609.

50 On both Illyricus and Foxe, see the helpful treatment of V. Norskov Olsen, *John Foxe and the Elizabethan Church* (Berkeley: University of California, 1973), 19-22.

51 The first volume of eight in the reprint edition of *Acts and Monuments* edited by George Townsend (1843, reprinted AMS, New York, 1985) is completely given over to Patristic martyrology. Compact one-volume editions have traditionally devoted two chapters to this period to the year 449 A.D. I have verified this in the edition of 1886 (London: Nisbett) and 1926 (Chicago: Winston).

us as we make fresh appropriation from the early Church today. Let us tease out some implications for the contemporary scene from this rapid survey:

1. The neglect of the early Church and its teaching is a relatively modern phenomenon, afflicting both conservative and liberal Protestantism for a period of some decades early in the twentieth century, and waning since the 1950s.
2. One hardly finds any evidence in the five hundred years surveyed of an attitude which 'cedes' the first centuries of Christianity to Roman Catholicism (or to Orthodoxy). This conception, which is alleged to be very widespread in evangelical Protestantism, is remarkably hard to locate in the literature available.
3. At the dawn of the Reformation, the advocates of Reform enjoyed (at least temporarily) the position of 'frontrunner' in the appropriation of early Christian teaching and in the advancing of the notion that the early Church, because not yet 'fallen', could help to judge the later church. This idea had arisen in connection with the Renaissance preference for antiquity, and was then commended by various Christian humanists such as Erasmus, (1466-1536) not all of which joined Protestant movements.
4. Today's fixation on and fascination with the Christianity of the second century – so powerful an influence on the number of evangelical Protestants who have decamped to Roman Catholicism or Orthodoxy – is an attitude very different from that displayed in both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism since the Renaissance. Among such persons, the Christianity of the second century has been explicitly reckoned to provide a kind of 'lodestone' for highlighting the failings of twentieth century Christianity – whether liberal, evangelical or fundamentalist. Instead, historic Protestantism has instead customarily used the first five centuries as a 'control'. Sadly, the pattern of today is that those who enthrone the second century as the test of genuine Christianity end up embracing the notion of an unbroken succession of church and Christian teaching which has been free from the possibility of any real decline from Christian truth. Having used the second century to critique the twentieth, they are left without possibility of further critique of what they have by this process embraced.
5. It is urgent that the Protestantism of today recapture the principle, apparently obvious until the twentieth century, that the Reformation was itself a fresh appropriation of all the early Christianity deemed to be consistent with the supreme authority of Scripture. Today there is afoot a questionable rival attitude which sweeps aside this historic perspective and treats as suspect all aspects of the Reformation deemed not consistent with an early Church naively judged to have contained no dross. This latter judgment, I would argue, is symptomatic of a diminished understanding of the classical world, rather than an advance in understanding.
6. Western Christianity's ability to draw on and to appraise Patristic Christianity has customarily gone hand in hand with the cultivation and maintenance of a curriculum of classical studies of the ancient Mediterranean world, its cultures and languages. It is an open secret that this curriculum has fallen on

very hard times, at the university level, since the middle of the twentieth century. It is a very great paradox that as fascination with early Christianity has revived in our times, the number of persons well-equipped to study this era and its theological literature on its own terms has declined. Surely, the Christian community should be making its voice heard in favor of a restoration of classical studies at multiple levels.

Abstract

In the last twenty years, persons departing from Evangelicalism have regularly alleged this movement's systematic neglect of early Christianity as a primary warrant for their re-affiliation to other branches of the Christian family. The complaint has become so widespread that it has now come to be embraced as self-evidently accurate; no burden of proof has been laid on those pressing the charge. Yet a historical survey of five centuries discloses that to whatever extent early Christianity has been neglected in the recent past, this neglect has characterized liberal as well as evangelical Protestantism. In the more distant evangelical Protestant past, the period 1500-1900 was characterized by a much deeper familiarity with the Early Church and a much freer appropriation of its teaching and practices. The current upswing of interest in the Early Church provides Evangelicalism with an opportunity to reassert its earlier interest in and creative use of Patristic resources.

Remembering Our Future Explorations in Deep Church

Andrew Walker & Luke Bretherton (editors)

Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches drink from the well of a common Christian tradition rooted in the early Christian centuries. Many Evangelicals are now re-engaging with the faith and practice of the early church as they seek resources to live as disciples in a postmodern world.

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978-1-84227-504-7 / 216 x 140 mm / 240pp (est.) / £11.99

Paternoster, 9 Holdom Avenue, Bletchley, Milton Keynes MK1 1QR, UK