

THE MYSTERY OF OUR HISTORY: HOW KNOWLEDGE OF THE CHURCH FATHERS CAN STRENGTHEN THE CHURCH

Kimberly Hyland on the Importance of the
Past

The mystery of church history is less of a mystery to *solve* and more of a *heritage* to discover. The “mystery” lies in time’s way of clouding the history we neglect. Like most mysteries, this one offers a bloody trail, scores of murders, and reams of evidence all attesting to the veracity of the claims of Christianity. But here at the start, I suggest we assume a different paradigm than Sherlock, Colombo, or even a rousing game of *Clue*. Instead, I encourage you to join me and become a curious child, perhaps rummaging ‘round a shadowy attic. We happen upon a dusty diary or box of faded photos – a mystery of which we had no, or, at best, little, awareness. It offers us a delicious invitation to an adventure through the ages, promising precious knowledge to those who will take the time to explore its secrets.

Why Christians Need to Know the Early Church Fathers

By and large, Christianity in the West has been content to leave the Church Fathers shrouded in the ignorance of mystery and forgotten history. Our modern Sunday congregation would be hard pressed to respond knowledgeably to questions such as “Who were the Church Fathers?” and “What was their role in the early church?” The answers to these and similar questions are not common knowledge among western Christians. This popular ignorance of the early Church Fathers, much less their apologetic strategies and impact, is, at best, a lost opportunity to learn from men who were on the front lines of establishing Christian theology. At worst, it is a gaping hole in the understanding of our Christian history and heritage. Conversely, the study of the early Church Fathers such as Justin Martyr can teach modern Christians how to defend their faith with wisdom and conviction, even as they are willing to acknowledge the virtue and true beliefs of their opponents.

Theologian Bryan M. Litfin describes our modern amnesia when it comes to knowing church history: “We know there were famous Christians who lived ‘back then’ but we can’t quite put a finger on who they were or what they did. Something about being thrown to the lions and the Romans and all that, right?”¹ The understanding of this period is arguably more informed by classic movies such as *Ben Hur* than by actual historical study of the era. But unlike movie stars, Litfin asserts, “the opening actors in the Christian drama were flesh-and-blood people who

¹ Bryan M. Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 3.

lived their lives in God's presence just as we do today."² These were people who, while ancient to us, were contemporaries of the nascent Church of Jesus Christ.

What is at stake if the Church Fathers remain shrouded in the fog of mystery? We can see the fallout already. The lost heritage of the historicity of the Church has left her adrift. Increasingly, the name Christian is ambiguous and far from representative of a single and historic, much less orthodox, ideology. When there is nothing to define Christianity, being a "Christian" begins to mean nothing. The ignorance of the Fathers has led to ignorance of the doctrines so vital to sustaining and defending our faith. We do not completely know ourselves as Christians until we know the Church Fathers.

Founders of the Church

For those who *are* familiar with the Church Fathers, they know them primarily in association with specific doctrines. While the formation of doctrine is the most familiar of the Church Fathers' contributions to the Church as we know it, understanding these men goes beyond connecting their names to their respective doctrines. The primary mission of the early Church Fathers was *the same as ours* – to convey the Gospel of Jesus Christ and thereby fulfill the Great Commission. The subsequent doctrines were the fruit of their dedication to that mission. This "flesh-and-blood" reality is important to keep in mind as we consider the men who founded the Church.³

² Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

The study of the Church Fathers helps us to understand the Christian faith beyond our limited memory. Liftin writes, “the fathers help us to get in touch with the general thrust of the Christian faith.”⁴ He breaks this down into “*doctrinal*” and “*communal*” thrust.⁵ Doctrinal thrust is the more familiar and gives us the foundational understanding of how the Christian faith was defined by those closest to its earliest days and teachers. This historic orthodoxy is crucial to the faithful expression of Christianity.⁶ The communal thrust helps us understand the Fathers as real men who loved and followed Jesus, just like us. Our knowledge of both the acts of the Church Fathers and their doctrinal contributions gives us a greater understanding and appreciation of the “communion of saints” to which we so felicitously and providentially belong.⁷

Justin Martyr – Church Father

Born in Flavia Neapolis in about AD 100, Justin Martyr was a descendant of Greek or Roman colonists. While still a young man, he studied philosophy in the various schools (Stoic, Peripatetic, Pythagorean, and finally Platonist) searching for truth, which was ultimately a search for God. As Justin tells it, he encountered an old man who told him about the Hebrew prophets, “more ancient than all those who are considered philosophers, . . . who alone saw and declared

⁴ Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

the truth to mankind' (*Dial.* 7.1-2)."⁸ ⁹ As a result of this encounter, Justin converted to Christianity, what he called the *true* philosophy.

After this encounter with the old man, Justin writes, "Straightway a flame was kindled in my soul; and a love of the prophets, and of those men who are friends of Christ, possessed me; and whilst revolving his words in my mind, I found this philosophy alone to be safe and profitable. Thus, and for this reason, I am a philosopher."¹⁰ Justin established a school for this newfound philosophy in Rome where he "engaged in oral and written debates with pagans, heretics, and Jews."¹¹ Eusebius writes, "Justin was especially prominent in those days. In the guise of a philosopher he preached the divine word, and contended for the faith in his writings."¹² He thereby became both an evangelist *and* apologist for the Christian faith.

Justin's defense of the faith was a defense of its followers as well. Under Rome, Christians experienced persecution based on accusations emanating from rumors of abominable practices as well as simply for

⁸ The authenticity of Justin Martyr's account of his philosophical training and the details of his conversion are subjects of debate. Whether he was formally schooled or, like many of his day, attained his knowledge from more popular Platonism, what is clear is his authentic conversion and his desire to bridge between the ideas of his culture and the truth of Christianity.

⁹ Arthur J. Droge, "Justin Martyr and the Restoration of Philosophy," *Church History* 56, no. 3 (September 1987): 303.

¹⁰ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *St. Justin Martyr* (Toledo: Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2014), 145.

¹¹ Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 48.

¹² *Ibid.*

being called “Christian.” Justin’s primary defense took the form of the writings he is best known for, his *First* and *Second Apologies*, a measured and strategic response to the persecution of Christians. Through these writings, he defended the Church while simultaneously expositing the Gospel to Roman authorities.

Justin begins his *First Apology* with an appeal to the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius noting their shared love for piety and philosophy. He also challenges him, citing Plato’s teaching that “no state can be truly strong and blessed unless its kings become philosophers or its philosophers become kings.”¹³ Of significant note, Justin presents the same argument that led to his conversion:

We say that our doctrines are superior to those taught by the pagans, and we can prove that our claims are true by offering as our chief witness the sacred books of the Jews. Those books, O King, contain scores of prophecies that found their fulfillment in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ and in the spreading of the word by his apostles, . . . And they speak as well of those things that have not yet transpired: the coming return of our Lord from heaven and the final judgment of all flesh. These books are available to all, and I am prepared on any day and at any hour to survey them with you.¹⁴

¹³ Louis Markos, *Ancient Voices: An Insider’s Look at the Early Church* (Middletown, RI: Stone Tower Press, 2022), 187.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

While Justin addressed the Roman emperor, it is unlikely that his letter ever made it to him.¹⁵ Nevertheless, his appeal has since been read by thousands, defending not only the integrity of the Church, but offering a reasoned explanation of its teachings as well.

Both Justin and the old man's appeal to the Hebrew prophets bears noting. There is something to be said for heeding the voices of the past, especially when their echo has not faded with time. The old man made this very point when speaking of the prophets: "Their writings are still extant, and he who has read them is very much helped in his knowledge of the beginning and end of things, and of those matters which the philosopher ought to know, provided he has believed them."¹⁶ The same could be said of the Church Fathers.

As his name foreshadows, Justin died a martyr along with his friends after their refusal to sacrifice to the pagan gods. In his *First Apology*, Justin wrote how prior to his conversion he had witnessed the courage of the Christian martyrs. Now as he faced his own impending death, he too demonstrated that fearlessness. Confronted by the prefect Rusticus, who mockingly asked if he supposed he would receive some eternal reward by dying, Justin replied "I do not 'suppose' it, but I *know* it and am fully persuaded of it."¹⁷ In what may have appeared to others a failure, both Justin Martyr's words in life and his courage in death served as a faithful

¹⁵ Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 50.

¹⁶ Roberts and Donaldson, *St. Justin Martyr*, 144.

¹⁷ Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 50.

defense of the Gospel, as he indeed gained the ultimate reward of Heaven.

Justin Martyr – Apologist

Justin Martyr has been called a model apologist for those who wish to convey the Gospel to intellectuals. Eusebius writes, “Justin, in philosopher’s garb, preached the word of God.”¹⁸ While not a philosopher in the sense of Plato and Aristotle, Justin aptly defined philosophy as “the knowledge of that which really exists, and a clear perception of the truth.”¹⁹ The influence of Plato can be seen in Justin’s disposition to see the good, true, and beautiful wherever it was found, in both Christians *and* pagans. This enabled him to acknowledge the truth his opponents possessed even as he challenged their error.

Perhaps Justin’s greatest contribution was his effective use of the idea of *logos* to build a bridge between the transcendent Platonic ideals of goodness, truth, and beauty and those estranged from them.²⁰ Stoic philosophers, unsatisfied with popular religion and superstition, had suggested the Greek concept of *Logos* as the intermediary between “absolute divinity and finite materiality.”²¹ As a believer, Justin recognized Christ as the incarnation of God: “In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God and the Logos was God. . . . And the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us. . . . Jesus Christ, he said, was the one and only path between

¹⁸ Joseph J. Sikora, “Philosophy and Christian Wisdom According to Saint Justin Martyr,” *Franciscan Studies* 23 (1963): 244.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 248.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 244.

²¹ Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 252.

spiritual and earthly realms.”²² Justin writes, “Five hundred years ago Socrates bore witness to the truth, the Word or Logos that embodies true reason and that reveals that which is false and wicked. Today I bear witness that that Logos was made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. . . . we worship loyally the Logos that became man.”²³ It was this understanding of Christ as *Logos* which bridged what was good and true in Greek philosophy to the fuller truth of Christianity. Moreover, it defined Justin’s apologetics and fulfilled his search for God.²⁴

Modern Applications

Os Guinness defines persuasion as “the art of speaking to people who, for whatever reason, are indifferent or resistant to what we have to say.”²⁵ Justin Martyr’s strategic and persuasive defense of the Christian faith was presented to a Roman culture and authorities who were not only resistant to Christianity but were *persecuting* it. How can we harness the ancient wisdom of Justin in our postmodern context and similar (though less dangerous) challenge to defend the Christian faith persuasively and effectively? While there are many more, Justin’s life offers four practical applications that translate well: friendship, bridge building, problem solving, and generosity of spirit.

²² Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 252-3.

²³ Markos, *Ancient Voices*, 187.

²⁴ Wendy Elgersma Helleman, “Justin Martyr and the ‘Logos’: An Apologetical Strategy,” *Philosophia Reformata* 67, no. 2 (2002): 132.

²⁵ Os Guinness, *Fool’s Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 18.

Justin did not consider his opponent an enemy but rather a fellow seeker of truth. Regarding Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, Litfin describes it as a "a two-day debate between friendly adversaries," who when they were done, "agreed it had been a mutually profitable experience. . . . The whole discourse was carried out with a civility that is quite rare in the history of Jewish-Christian relations."²⁶ As we engage with people who hold different worldviews, we should consider them first as friends and be on the lookout for what we might have in common.

Justin's engagement with his opponents is much like the Apostle Paul's, who also used his knowledge of philosophy to preach the Gospel. Louis Markos describes Paul's encounter with Stoic and Epicurean philosophers in the Areopagus: "Rather than condemn them as heathens cut off completely from the light of God, he found a way to build a bridge between their limited pagan understanding of God and the full revelation of God in Christ."²⁹ Like Paul, Justin Martyr appealed to the commonality of philosophy: "I do not say that your poets and philosophers were fools or knaves. I say rather that our doctrines are fuller and more divine, revealing the complete and final truth of God."²⁷ Both Paul and Justin demonstrated grace *and* boldness as they sought to persuade their opponents toward the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Litfin describes Justin's use of the idea of *Logos* as borrowing "a well-known philosophical concept to show that Christian doctrine solved the great conundrum of

²⁶ Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 47.

²⁷ Markos, *Ancient Voices*, 189.

the day” and thus completing “the intellectual journey that Greek philosophy had only begun.”²⁸ As modern Christians consider current cultural challenges, we can meet them with Biblical solutions. Justin’s powerful apologetic demonstrates the usefulness of this pragmatic response for both evangelism and apologetics. Acknowledging the prevailing needs of our time demonstrates Christian goodwill as well as the Gospel’s solutions to our many human dilemmas.

Justin’s desire to show that Greek philosophy found its fulfillment in Christ demonstrated a generosity of spirit that modern apologists might emulate. His defense of the early church to Roman authorities showed both courage and love for God, the Church, and its enemies. His writings were a bold response to unjust persecution, defending Christians against grievous accusations and demonstrating wisdom as he appealed to the Roman leaders’ sense of justice and laws. Justin’s apologies were an original apologetic that killed *three* birds with one stone. They were a necessary and practical defense on behalf of persecuted Christians, an acknowledgement of what was good and true in his opponents, and a presentation of the Gospel to the lost via an explanation of the Church’s beliefs and practices.

In conclusion, as church attendance decreases and the name “Christian” becomes increasingly relative, restoring our heritage through knowledge of the Church Fathers and church history has the potential to strengthen our faith, even as it equips us to defend it. The life of Justin Martyr serves as just one example of the rich lessons available to those who will acquaint themselves

²⁸ Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 55.

with these faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Fittingly, the words of a Jewish prophet admonish us toward this restoration: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls’.” (Jeremiah 6:16)

As we emerge from the attic, we squint at the stark brightness of modern reality. But we have found something precious in the dim light, a heritage that offers clarity and knowledge to our confused times. Even as our eyes adjust, we resolve to return. The mystery of the Church Fathers has captured our imaginations, and we long to know more.

Bibliography

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