

# Unveiling the Scriptures – The Role of the Fathers

We conclude this series by examining the role of the Fathers in Christian Scriptural interpretation and by offering a threefold summary of our study.

## The Role of the Fathers

The Church Fathers were a varied lot. They lived in a number of different centuries, had very different personalities and gifts, spoke different languages, and wrote to answer different questions, in different contexts. There is, in fact, a tremendous diversity among them, including a diversity of Biblical exegesis. We recall, for example, that Saints Jerome and Augustine conducted a very public and spirited debate about the meaning of the conflict between Peter and Paul in *Galatians* 2. The Fathers also differed among themselves about such things as whether or not all would be saved, with Saint Gregory of Nyssa offering what was distinctly a minority report—one which the Church at large would later come to quietly set aside. With all this patristic diversity, we may ask, where does their authority reside?

We answer: in their core consensus. The diversity among them makes the underlying unity shine all the more brilliantly, in the same way as the tremendous liturgical diversity of the church at that time make their underlying unity of faith all the more impressive. The Fathers are not authoritative guides because each one had a kind of hotline to God which guaranteed the truth of their writings—for how then could we explain their sometimes spirited disagreements? They are authoritative because their underlying core unity witnesses to the apostolic faith diffused throughout the world.

The Fathers share this core unity, sometimes called “the rule of faith”, because they received it from the apostles. Saint Irenaeus is crystal clear about that. In the Creed we confess belief not in “one, holy, catholic, and *patristic* church”, but in “one, holy, catholic, and *apostolic* church”. The Fathers are authoritative because their consensus witnesses to the faith they received from the apostles. The Fathers are the conduit for the apostles’ authority, not the source of that authority itself.

So, how may we summarize how the Fathers read the Scriptures and how we should read the Scriptures after them? I suggest three main ways: that we read the Scriptures on our knees, before the Cross, and over shoulders of the Fathers.

1. *We read the Scriptures on our knees.* The Scriptures must be read as the authoritative Word of God. Though they are culturally-*expressed* (as is everything, both then and now), they are not culturally-*conditioned*. In other words, their message, when we finally have learned it using the many tools of authentic scholarship, is eternally binding on the Church. Bluntly put, we do not have the freedom to junk what the Scriptures say because we now find that it clashes with our contemporary secular culture. Those who would set aside Saint Paul and his counsel regarding gender and sexuality (to

choose but one example) arguing that “he was a man of his time” rarely stop to reflect that they are *also* people of *their* time — and perhaps people insufficiently critical of the times in which they live. The message of the Scriptures, though expressed through the medium of Second Temple exegesis, is still the timeless Word of God. As such it constitutes the norm through which we judge the teachings of all other ages, including our own.

2. *We read the Scriptures before the Cross.* The whole Bible is about Jesus, including the Old Testament. This means that we read the Old Testament commandments about requiring circumcision, observing the Sabbath, keeping the food laws, building the Tabernacle and Temple, and observing a festal calendar as provisions for one stage of the nation’s journey to Jesus, not as eternally abiding commandments. If the goal of the Old Testament were a glorified Jewish nation, it would make sense to read these commandments as eternally binding. But the goal of the Old Testament was not a glorified *nation*, but a glorified *Messiah*. The commandments of the Old Testament may be read with spiritual profit, provided they are read for what it tells us about Jesus, or as containing a moral message for us today (i.e. with the tools of allegory).
3. *We read the Scriptures over the shoulders of the Fathers.* The New Testament Scriptures, being the work of the apostolic Church, must be read *within* the apostolic Church. This applies also to the Old Testament, for Christ gave to His Church the key to understanding the Old Testament Scriptures as well. The apostles assumed that their audience had as their context the liturgical experience of the Church and its public preaching. Wrenching the Scriptures from this ecclesiastical context (as the Gnostics did) is certain to produce a variant and incorrect interpretation. That was Tertullian’s point in his little work *The Prescription against Heretics*. The point perhaps has continued relevance in the ecumenical setting of today. The consensus of the Fathers and their approach to the Scriptures form the paradigm for our use of the Scriptures today.

I began this address with the suggestion that the Scriptures could stand some unveiling, since many people today view the Bible simply as a magical book dictated by God—hard to understand, and so best left to one side unopened in a drawer. It is not a magical book; it is something better. It is Christ’s book—and therefore belongs to us, as His Body. It underwent a long process of development, as it grew both in size and significance before it became the volume we have today. Since it is God’s gift to us, we must receive it with reverence and gratitude and place it in our hearts with love.

We need to do this now more than ever. Christendom has fallen, and the world grows ever darker and more dangerous. The contents of the Bible remain mostly unread and unknown in our culture and in the world where we live, which perhaps accounts for the darkness and the danger. When Christ opened the Scriptures to His disciples on the road to Emmaus, their hearts burned within them. May the Spirit of Christ open the unveiled Scriptures to us as well and make our own hearts burn. The world is dark and cold, and desperately needs the light and warmth that this fire provides.