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Review: Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction

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Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction
Edward L Smither
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build a uniquely Christian model of counseling that applies the truths from both God's Word and his created order. It will stretch readers not well versed in both Scripture and psychology, but it also represents how far integration has progressed in that it is assumed that readers will be familiar with both disciplines. In this regard *Integrative Psychotherapy* exemplifies the type of integration in which most practitioners still do not engage: a serious examination of current research into human behavior and a commitment to both studying and abiding by God's unchanging and inerrant Word. Though I don't think this is the only counseling book that should adorn the bookshelves of pastors, theologians, and therapists, I do recommend that all scholars of pastoral care and counseling read it and find shelf space for it.

Justin M. Smith
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Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction. By Bryan M. Litfin. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007, 304 pp., $ 22.99 paper.

Bryan Litfin has rendered a great service to students of early church history (and the professors who teach them) in this introductory patristics text. In ten chapters, Litfin narrates the stories of ten Church fathers—seven Greek (Ignatius of Antioch, Justin, Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, John Chrysostom, and Cyril of Alexandria) and three Latin (Tertullian, Perpetua, and Augustine). The reader will immediately notice the author's rightful inclusion of a woman, Vibia Perpetua, in his account of the Fathers—a group largely determined by their literary and theological output in the first five centuries.

As an introduction to patristics, this book generally resembles Ramsey's *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (a work cited by Litfin for further reading in his introductory chapter) yet it is distinct because Ramsey organizes his survey around themes (e.g., Scripture, prayer, monasticism) and certainly writes from a Roman Catholic perspective. Litfin's book might also be compared to Chadwick's *The Early Church*; yet, this work, first published nearly forty years ago, focuses more on early Christian movements and is generally more difficult reading. Litfin, correctly noting that most patristics texts are doctrinal in nature (e.g. Kelly's *Early Christian Doctrines*), chooses a biographical and narrative approach instead. Not only does this approach successfully invite and engage the modern reader, it is faithful to the patristic worldview that valued remembering the lives and concrete models of faith through a tradition of sacred biography (a corpus that numbered over 8,000 individual biographies by the medieval period).

Litfin's unique biographical approach is a necessary complement to existing patristics scholarship. He has made the early Church fathers accessible and inviting to evangelical students who may have little exposure to, background for, and consequent interest in this period. Litfin's work contributes to the growing evangelical interest and scholarly output in patristics that presently includes works like Chris Hall's *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* and *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*; InterVarsity's *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Thomas Oden, ed.), and Baker Academic's present series, Evangelical Ressourcement: Ancient Sources for the Church's Future.

Liftin's work has numerous strengths, including being resourceful, inviting, accessible, integrative, and engaging. I will comment on each of these areas of strength.

In the opening pages, Litfin includes a helpful map (p. 8) of the Roman world to which readers can easily turn when unsure about the location of Nicea or Hippo, for example,

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or when distinguishing between Eusebius of Cappadocian Caesarea and Eusebius of Palestinian Caesarea, for example. Furthermore, he includes a timeline dating from 800 BC to AD 500 noting key events in the church and politics as well as the lives of the Fathers (pp. 9–10). At the end of each chapter, Litfin includes a bibliography with key secondary sources and a reference to the Fathers' writings in English translation, providing students with immediate resources for research.

Litfin's work is inviting to current evangelical undergraduate and seminary students. He accomplishes this is by beginning each chapter with a captivating anecdote that bridges into the narrative of the particular Father to be treated. A man on death row introduces Ignatius of Antioch (pp. 31–33); Tertullian is likened to a gun blazing, Wild West cowboy (pp. 97–99); and C. S. Lewis's imaginative depiction of Narnia introduces the reader to Origen's exegetical method (pp. 142–43). These anecdotes serve to draw readers into the upcoming stories and pique interest in the Fathers. Furthermore, Litfin narrates these stories in an inviting way. For example, he winsomely tells of Justin's journey to faith (pp. 56–58) while compassionately recounting Origen's family background and later sufferings (pp. 144–47; 154–58). I laughed out loud when he described Augustine and Monica's relationship as bordering on "unhealthy codependence" (p. 217). He so effectively describes the layout of the city of Hippo that readers feel transported there (p. 228). Finally, Litfin concludes each chapter with a section called "a taste of"—a choice primary source reading from the father surveyed. More than admonishing students to journey to the library in search of theses sources, Litfin inserts key texts into the book that will hopefully leave them yearning for more.

The accessibility of this book is another of its many strengths. This is especially true for people beginning to read the Fathers. While well written, it is free of technical terms and seems aimed at an undergraduate reading level. Each chapter ranges between twenty-two and twenty-six pages, enabling people to read a chapter in one sitting. Furthermore, Litfin does not assume that his readers have background knowledge of people, places, movements, or concepts that he treats. Appropriately, then, he fills in details about these matters for clarity's sake. For example, in chapter one, Litfin provides helpful background on the city of Antioch while making connections to Paul's letter to the Galatians (pp. 33–36). In his account of Justin, he expounds on the *pallium* and its significance as philosopher's clothing (pp. 58–59). In chapter three, he carefully explains Gnosticism (pp. 80–89) while outlining Marcion's thought in chapter four (pp. 105–8). His account of Perpetua includes a helpful definition of a catechumen (pp. 121–22). In chapter seven, Litfin aids readers with a survey of Constantine's rise to power and the resulting paradigm shift in church-state relations (pp. 168–72). Finally, in his chapter on Cyril, he nicely narrates the rise of the papacy (pp. 247–50).

Litfin also serves readers by clarifying some misconceptions about the Fathers. In his introductory chapter, he argues against the perception that they relied more on tradition as a means of spiritual authority by showing their great commitment to the Scriptures (pp. 20–22). Similarly, he relates that the Fathers were little "c" catholics as opposed to Roman Catholics of Luther's day or even the present day (pp. 22–24). Litfin provides a balanced view of Origen. While the Alexandrian father is often depicted as a castrated Platonist given to excessive allegory, Litfin emphasizes Origen's great love for the Scriptures, gives a fair appraisal of his exegetical method, and offers a reminder of Origen's commitment to the *regula fidei* as a safeguard against irresponsible allegorizing (pp. 147–54). That said, Litfin objectively critiques Origen's theological errors, including Trinitarian subordinationism, purgatory, and universalism (p. 157). Litfin also responds to some misconceptions about Augustine's sexual life. Though Augustine was promiscuous for a brief period in his youth, Litfin has correctly shown that he was in a committed, monogamous relationship with an unnamed concubine for fourteen years in what modern readers might consider a common law marriage.

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Augustine would have married this woman had she not been from a lower social class—a union prohibited by Roman law (pp. 220–21).

Litfin furthers the book's accessibility by making difficult theological issues understandable. In the first chapter, for example, he offers a plausible explanation for the development of the one bishop model of church leadership by noting Ignatius's reasoning that by investing more authority in one bishop, he would defend the church against heresy (pp. 42–43). Furthermore, Litfin carefully explains the role of the *regula fidei*—an area of specialty in his research—and its vital role in the historical development of biblical interpretation and the canon of Scripture. While this question raises evangelical concern for spiritual authority within the Scripture-tradition debate, Litfin remains a faithful evangelical and a faithful historian by showing how the church relied upon the *regula fidei* as a means of "guarding the good deposit of faith" (1 Tim 6:20) in the centuries prior to a formally recognized canon of Scripture. Furthermore, he provides a nice overview of the history of Trinitarian thought from Tertullian to the Council of Nicea (pp. 174–76). Readers will certainly benefit from Litfin's helpful summary before attempting to tackle more exhaustive accounts (e.g. Kelly, pp. 109–37; 252–79). Finally, Litfin offers a clear distinction between Alexandrian and Antiochene exegesis (pp. 149–54; 197–201) while navigating the reader safely through the thorny Nestorian issue (pp. 251–54).

Another of Litfin's strengths is that despite taking a biographical approach, he craftily integrates into the narrative discussions of politics, heresy, theological movements, and the like, along with accounts of other Fathers who did not make Litfin's "top ten" list. In his account of Irenaeus, for example, he summarizes issues surrounding the historical development of the NT canon (p. 90). Through John Chrysostom's story, he treats the rise and development of monasticism (pp. 192–97). He impressively synthesizes the entire patristic period in his chapter on Cyril (pp. 254–58).

A final strength is the engaging nature of this book. While Litfin's narrative and dialog approach certainly stimulate reflection on the Fathers, he goes a step farther by providing several discussion questions at the end of each chapter to help readers engage on a deeper level. These questions could be used to spark classroom discussion or help a church small group as its members read the book devotionally.

Though quite impressed with Litfin's work overall, I find several weaknesses. On a grammatical/style level, I am not comfortable with the use of contractions—something Litfin uses throughout—in academic writing. I also have reservations with the use of the second person singular/plural in formal writing.

In terms of selection of material, I am not in full agreement with Litfin's "top ten" list of Fathers. Specifically, I must complain about the absence of Cyprian and Ambrose from the Latin Fathers and the lack of a chapter dedicated to the Cappadocians Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, the primary architects of fourth century theological development of the Trinity and the Holy Spirit. Though these Fathers do make it into the book, their stature should earn them more focused attention. On the other hand, I have trouble with how much attention Cyril receives. Though Litfin has argued for Cyril's careful exegesis and important role in the Nestorian controversy, I am not convinced that he should be so distinguished in light of his less than exemplary political maneuvering—especially when he is "sharing the stage" with the likes of Ignatius, Perpetua, and Chrysostom. It is no secret that Litfin's mentor, Robert Wilken is a great fan of Cyril. Could it be that this influence has willed Cyril into such prominence in this book?

In the realm of historical and interpretive issues, I have a few problems. Specifically, Litfin positively refers to Justin's "eclectic" apologetic and theological method without addressing the dangers of syncretism (p. 68). Perhaps this would have been a good place to bring up Tertullian's "Jerusalem over Athens" approach by way of contrast. Also,

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Litfin's treatment of Montanism is less than satisfying. With little more than conjecture, he alleges that this movement was not regarded as a third-century heresy because one of its members, Tertullian, was such a champion of orthodoxy. Also, Litfin fails to support the claim that North African Montanism differed from its source in Asia Minor (p. 129). My question, then, is why is there no *St. Tertullian*? Finally, I am concerned about Litfin comparing the Montanists to modern charismatics. Though others have popularly proposed this parallel, the issues, theology, and contexts are so different between the two groups that the comparisons are not warranted. It also opens the door for a charismatic "trail of blood" to the early church.

Though Litfin nicely handles canonicity in chapter four, I have two concerns about his arguments. First, he suggests that Christianity became "more of a book religion by the mid-second century" (p. 109). Does this mean that the Scriptures were merely circulating in the memories of oral communicators for sixty to one hundred years? How are we to understand the rather "bookish" language of Scripture about itself (cf. Luke 1:1–4; 1 Tim 5:18; 2 Pet 3:15)? What then was the role of the *lectores* referenced by early second century Fathers Justin Martyr (*First Apology*, 67) and *2 Clement* 19:1? Second, Litfin indicates that Constantine enabled church leaders to make pronouncements about the content of Scripture toward the establishment of a canon. While the emperor's request of Eusebius of Caesarea for fifty Greek Bibles in ca. 330 establishes this claim, it should be noted that the key church councils that discussed the issue (Laodocea, 363; Hippo, 393; Carthage, 397) were local councils not convened by imperial decree. Furthermore, Athanasius's Easter letter in 367, which listed the canonical Scriptures, was written after five exiles and an ecclesiastical career spent battling Constantine and his sons due to their Arian leanings.

Another area of concern focuses on issues of historiography and sources. Litfin's chapter on Perpetua is based largely on her diaries in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. The consensus of patristic scholarship today, however, is that the account is wildly biased, glossed, and therefore historically suspect. Though Litfin certainly has a case for responsible use of this source, his chapter would be well served with a substantive footnote answering critics of hagiography while defending his position. Similarly, his accounts of Ambrose and Augustine's ordinations are also based on hagiographical sources—Paulinus of Milan and Possidius of Calama (pp. 223, 227–28). Again, these sources can be admitted as historical evidence especially when other corroborating sources can be identified (e.g. Augustine's sermons and letters); however, the criticism of opponents of hagiography should not go unanswered.

As words and their meanings are foundational to history, I have concerns with Litfin's terminology in two cases. First, he likens Tertullian to a Christian "fundamentalist" in a region—North Africa—that is now dominated by Islamic "fundamentalism" (p. 104). In Christian circles alone, fundamentalism is certainly a loaded term, patient of a plethora of definitions and uses. Islamic fundamentalism, though historically traceable to several movements in recent centuries, certainly does not typify the average modern Tunisian—the inheritors of the Roman soil where Tertullian lived. Hence, this term should be avoided for the unnecessary confusion it causes. Secondly, I have a general aversion to Litfin's use of "barbarian" to describe the conquering Goths (p. 249). Though they did act barbarically, so did the Nicene-leaning Roman Emperor Theodosius when he slaughtered 7,000 inhabitants of Thessalonica in 388! Such prejudicial language ought to be avoided, and it would seem better to refer to the Goths by their ethno-linguistic or geographical identity while recounting their nefarious deeds.

Despite my critiques, I recommend this patristics primer to professors and students of early Christianity. Personally, I have adopted it as one of my texts for an introduction to patristics course. Resourceful, inviting, accessible, integrative, and engaging as it is, this book is inspiring reading for contemporary pastors and laypeople who reflect on

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the early church as they forge ahead to be the church of Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century.

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There is a God. How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind. By Antony G. N. Flew. New York: HarperOne, 2007, xxiv + 222 pp., $24.95 paper.

"The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" said Chicken Little. The world atheist community certainly thinks it has fallen. Their hero and granddaddy, the "world's most notorious atheist," says he now believes in "God." This has caused quite a stir. For over sixty-five years, since he left Kingswood School in Bath at the age of fifteen (as Flew himself notes, "I can say that whatever faith I had when I entered K.S. was gone by the time I finished"; p. 11). He was an atheist—and not a quiet one, taking on all comers, including this reviewer, in debate on the question of the existence of God.

Flew once told me in a personal conversation that he was really an agnostic; he believed that there was not sufficient evidence or good reason to believe in God. However, Flew went on to say that the question of whether such a Being existed or not was so very important that he made a public plea to all comers—took a stand—so he could be convinced if there was a God. Over the years many have tried to convince him, but to no avail.

This changed several years ago. I had first met Tony Flew in February, 1985, in Dallas at what he refers to as the "Shootout at the O.K. Corral" (p. 69). Early in the morning in 2004, Flew called me from England. He proceeded to tell me that he had just reread the first half of our debate: Terry L. Miethe and Anthony Flew, *Does God Exist: A Believer and An Atheist Debate* (HarperCollins, 1991). He said that he no longer had any substantial disagreement with anything I had said in my part of the debate. Later he said the same thing to me, in a letter dated 27 April 2004: "I have just finished rereading about the first one hundred pages of our book and find that I do not now disagree with much you said in those pages. I think we may well find that we reach very substantial agreement without needing extra time." From "the world's most notorious atheist," Flew had moved to one of the world's newest theists! However, there may be more than meets the eye, or *less* as it were, to this whole story. First things first, though, and that is a review of his book.

The preface, written by Roy Abraham Varghese, starts with the quote from an Associated Press headline on 9 December 2004: "Famous Atheist Now Believes in God, More or Less Based on Scientific Evidence." Varghese mentions Flew's paper "Theology and Falsification," first presented at a 1950 meeting of the Oxford University Socratic Club chaired by C. S. Lewis, which "became the most widely reprinted philosophical publication of the last century." In this new book, Varghese continues, Flew "gives an account of the arguments and evidence that led him to change his mind. . . . Curiously, the response to the AP story from Flew's fellow atheists verged on hysteria" (p. viii). Varghese rounds out his preface with discussions of "Flew's Significance in the History of Atheism," "Flew, Logical Positivism, and the Rebirth of Rational Theism," and "The 'New Atheism' or Positivism Redux."

In the introduction, Flew writes: "Ever since the announcement of my 'conversion' to deism, I have been asked on numerous occasions to provide an account of the factors that led me to change my mind. . . . I have now been persuaded to present here what might be called my last will and testament" (p. 1). This is the purpose of this new book.

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