

From Patristics to Postmodernity: Does a Message Still Exist?

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by

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## GLEANINGS FROM THE PATRISTICS

Dr. David Wheeler once advised that while not all are called to be an evangelist, all Christians are called to be evangelical. Although some may counter that postmodernity is waning, the question remains how one might be evangelical in a postmodern world. The concept that no metanarrative exists has been one of the pillars of postmodernity, and as such challenges the premise that Scripture contains an overarching story encompassing all of mankind. If Dr. Wheeler was correct, and all are called to be evangelical, then the question that would seem to require answering is how one might begin to address the challenge that metanarratives do not exist. By studying the Patristics it is suggested that it is possible to demonstrate that the challenges facing the Church today are identical to those of the past, and if this theory is correct, then it would appear reasonable to believe that some of the techniques used by the early fathers would bear fruit if employed today. In an effort to demonstrate this thesis, this paper shall focus on three main matters. First, the Patristics will be briefly examined in an effort to identify areas of commonality and difference. Second, an effort will be made to propose some principles of sound hermeneutics that could help the biblical scholar of today. The third staple will be to tie the past and present together in an effort to demonstrate the validity that the metanarrative of the Church not only exists, but continues to stand upon the shoulders of those that came before.

### **When, Unity, Diversity, and Why**

The Patristic Era shall be defined for the purposes of this paper as those years beginning with the death of John (ca. 100) and ending at AD 500. It is conceded that such dating is arbitrarily chosen, but shall sufficiently serve the purpose herein, and is satisfactorily broad enough to include Ignatius through the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. By way of examining

the fathers, it has been decided to focus first on their commonalities and then turn to articulated differences.

### A Common Foe

When one looks to the first five hundred years in general, and to the fathers in particular, there is commonality in that all chased common foes, namely any philosophy, ideology, religiosity, schism, or heresy that challenged the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Hall, citing Boniface Ramsey, notes that in order to have the title of “father” in the early Church, one had to meet four distinct criteria.

“Father” and related terms such as “patristic,” “patrology,” and “patrologist,” suggest, Ramsey believes, “a certain venerable quality associated with age. Second was the quality of holiness of life. Third, one must have left behind a teaching of some kind, however small, or at least a reputation. Beyond this, and most importantly, the church must have recognized a father’s teaching as resting within the bounds of Scripture and tradition. Finally, the father had ecclesiastical approval, meaning it was the church itself who affirmed the individual as a father.”<sup>1</sup>

What cannot be missed from the above is that the fathers accepted external leadership, trusting secondarily in the Church and primarily in Jesus Christ. The title of father came from the believing body and was not something that one could simply apply in a manner analogous to Napoleon’s crowning of himself to avoid Papal oversight.

The congruence among the fathers was that they all retained the person of Jesus Christ as the seat of primacy, along with the written Scriptures associated with the revelation of Jesus. Truly, even of Origen it has been said that the priority of Scripture was key.

When we come to examine more closely the various senses which Origen distinguishes in Scripture, we should first note that Origen, whose name is a byword for the use of allegory, is also the same person who gave much more weight than ever before to the literal sense; and even if on the one hand, he criticizes the *simpliciores* for stopping at

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 50-55.

this level, he is capable on the other hand of integrating it into an organic system of interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

It is the union of the two points above, namely what it took to be considered a father along with the explicit preeminence of Jesus and then Scripture as a witness to Him, that created the brotherhood that stood against the attacks on the faith. It was this band of brothers that both established and defended orthodoxy against the likes of Arianism, Marcionism, Gnosticism, and Montinism by putting forth the effort to establish clearly constructed ways of expressing what orthodox Christianity believed as compared to alternative philosophies. Of the Gnostic attack in particular Simonetti states,

While Clement's manner of interpretation was aimed at fostering acceptance by the Church of the Old Testament, now relieved of any typically Jewish prescriptions as a normative code for morality alongside the New Testament, the interpretative style of Ps. Barnabas became ever more established as the specifically Christian method of reading the Old Testament. Radical reinterpretation in a typological vein secured the authority of the Old Testament for the Church which was now under attack from the Gnostics. Their dualism and their disregard for the material world led them also to disdain the Old Testament as being the revelation of the God of creation, the Demiurge, in contrast to the New Testament, the revelation of the supreme, good God.<sup>3</sup>

For all of the various councils, methodologies, personalities, and biases, what cannot be missed is the fact that all of the fathers believed they were fighting the same fight, that they were all on the same side, seeking to codify and clearly express the central doctrines of Christianity. They were all focused on refuting the false teachings and claims being made by those who either sought the demise of Christianity, or who would preach a gospel other than that of Jesus Christ.

### Divergences

Perhaps no better picture exists of the differences between the methodologies used by the Church fathers than the schools of Alexandria and Antioch, and then the variances centered

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<sup>2</sup> Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis*, ed. Anders Bergquist and Markus Bockmuehl, trans. John A. Hughes (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1994), 44.

<sup>3</sup> Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, 14-15.

around the methodologies used to understand the linguistics of the text. While one might point easily and quickly to allegory as the source of controversy, it is maintained here that the matter was much more significant than merely whether or not one chose to use the allegorical method as they sought a deeper, more “spiritual” meaning from within the text. Here one is reminded of what it took to be considered a father, and as such they all agreed on the primacy of Scripture. Kannengiesser noted six factors, or “letters” of the text, which could have led to differences in understanding.

According to Kannengiesser, the fathers pointed to the fact that the Bible is a written document, and as such, the sequencing of words on the page caused the biblical message to make sense. This belief that there was access to epistemological knowledge, that they could know, was foundational. It is from this sureness that the fathers drew the conclusion that the literal words conveyed a message. However, they also recognized the real concern languages brought to the table, specifically noting the issues related to translating, and the propensity to translate incorrectly due to a lack of linguistic knowledge. Translation alone did not pose the only challenge.

The “missing / obscure” letter referenced situations where the literal passage lacked interpretation, clarity of interpretation, or was deemed that the reader was not be able to identify a clear, literal meaning. Such led individuals like Origen in part to allegory as a hermeneutical tool. In looking backward it is perhaps possible to see where the fathers occasionally interpreted passages, imposing their own cultural biases on those readings, thus leading to the “reinvented” letter, while still holding to the literal sense when possible – although using the reinvented letter to often serve their own purposes. Offering an *aide-mémoire*, these disagreements among the fathers does not challenge the unity of the group as a whole in regard to what they understood as

their mission.

The “metaphorical” letter is where the literal means explicitly what the words convey, but such a reading does not preclude the possibility of an implicit meaning within those same words. The metaphorical involves the use of imagination, but is still classified underneath the structure of the literal sense of Scripture. Contra the school at Alexandria, Antioch under Diodore of Tarsus recognized figurative or hyperbolic language without denying the possibility Scripture could contain layers of meaning.

The “intrinsic value” of the letter acknowledges Scripture could have more meaning than just what is found in the unembroidered rendering. However, the spiritual meaning is never divorced from the literal, meaning the “biblical” word was necessary first before one could interpret the spiritual word. Because of the primacy of the “biblical” word and thus the literal meaning, seeking the literal meaning first became a mechanism whereby there could be a consistent interpretation from one exegete to another.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Significance**

Kannengiesser’s text, in considering the vastness of size, could rightly be considered a summary of the Patristic Era, so to provide exhaustive detail in this work is simply not possible. The fathers in their preaching and teaching brought personal biases to the table. Likewise, they were not immune from bouts of eisegesis. Most importantly, none were divine and thus impeccable in nature: they were not unlike the Christian of today. These were fallen men in the same fashion as a Peter who denied Christ and a Paul who condoned the murder of Christians before his own conversion.

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity*, ed. D. Jeffrey Bingham (Lieden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 167-176. This footnote is inclusive of material beginning with the obscure letter through intrinsic value.

What the fathers did provide to the Christian believer was their work in crafting and articulating clearly and plainly, where possible, the essence of Christianity. These were the Christians who codified what is today known as the core doctrines of the Church. In many cases it was these earliest Christians that suffered torture and martyrdom as they worked to provide clarity of the supremacy of Christ and the Bible as witness to Him. The fathers, drawing at least in part on the rabbinical studies of the Old Testament, laid the foundation for how one ought to read the Bible for meaning and significance, and then to do so as one body operating under the singular headship of Jesus.

## HERMENEUTICAL PILLARS

### **Establishing Parameters**

It is believed that one could argue successfully that there exists at least a consensus that the Christian faith is tied directly to none other than the person of Jesus Christ. If such a stance is warranted, then what is one to do with the Bible today? Such was but one of the concerns addressed by Barth.

The fear that the holiness of Scripture might prejudice the holiness of God will always prove superfluous where the holiness of Scripture is believed in and respected. But in its uniqueness Scripture does not violate the dignity and significance of the other signs and witnesses of revelation. This is primarily because apart from Jesus Christ Himself there is still this other form of the Word of God, which Scripture needs to be the Word of God, just as it needs Scripture. Preaching and the sacrament of the Church do indeed need the basis and authority and authenticity of the original Word of God in Scripture to be the Word of God. But Scripture also needs proclamation by preaching and sacrament, for it wills to be read and understood and expounded and the Word of God attested in it wills to have actuality. Therefore Holy Scripture cannot stand alone as the Word of God in the Church.<sup>5</sup>

Barth unapologetically considered the Bible as the Word of God only in so far as it is not divorced from the true Word of God, Jesus. When Barth pointed to this dynamic relationship he was not denying the authority of Scripture, nor was he denying the possibility that one could read and understand Scripture. What he was doing was expressly stating the idea that without Jesus, the Bible no longer bears witness to the Messiah. Barth understood the purpose within Scripture to be that of pointing to Jesus alone.

In the Old Testament the Law is distinguished from the prophets by the fact that in the Law it is the calling of Israel, in the prophets the direction and instruction of Israel already called by the Word of Yahweh, which constitutes the material of the prophecy inherent in both. Similarly in the New Testament the Gospels are distinguished from the apostolic writings by the fact that the Gospels look back to the words and acts of Jesus as

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, Part 2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 501.

they point us to the resurrection, whereas the apostolic writings look back from the resurrection to the human situation as illumined and altered by it.<sup>6</sup>

Again for Barth, there exists but one purpose for Scripture, that being to point to Jesus. There was a firm conviction by this recent biblical scholar that there is a message from God to mankind, in written format, which has authority based on the originator of that message. If Barth is correct and Scripture bears witness to Jesus, and given that two thousand years have passed since the death, burial, physical resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, how is one to rightly divide the Word of God and thus glean an understanding of the message? Wolterstorff contends that everyone seeks meaning from texts.

But one of the things we all do, for at least some texts, is read to find out what the person who authored the text was saying thereby. We read to discover what I shall call the authorial discourse of the text.<sup>7</sup>

In answering the question of what one is to do with the Bible, Wolterstorff holds that there is a meaning within the text, and that meaning has bearing on the reader.

### The Origin and Definition

“The word *hermeneutics* is an English form of the classical Greek word *hermeneus*, which means an interpreter or expounder – one who explains things.”<sup>8</sup> But what does it mean when we say that one is explaining? Silva points to at least part of the difficulty in understanding what is meant when one tries to define hermeneutics.

Its traditional meaning is relatively simple: the discipline that deals with principles of interpretation. Some writers like to call it the science of interpretation; others prefer to speak of the art of interpretation (perhaps with the implication, “Either you’ve got it or you don’t!”). Apart from such differences of perspective, the basic concern of

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<sup>6</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 481.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 132.

<sup>8</sup> David Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 7.

hermeneutics is plain enough. It remains to be added, however, that when writers use the word hermeneutics, most frequently what they have in mind is biblical interpretation. Even when some other text is being discussed, the Bible likely lurks in the background.<sup>9</sup>

Silva continues,

But now, if the Bible is indeed a divine and unique book, should we not expect to use principles of interpretation that apply to it in a special way? By all means. Up to this point we have looked at what is often called general hermeneutics, that is, criteria that are relevant for the interpretation of anything. There is also such a thing as biblical hermeneutics. While some scholars dispute the need for such a particular discipline, no one who appreciates the special character of Scripture will want to ignore it.<sup>10</sup>

At this point it is suggested that one could understand Barth and Silva to be in substantive agreement, namely that there is something unique about Scripture and as such, that certain uniqueness must, by necessity, direct the methodology used toward understanding the text.

#### Heresy Brings Us Together – Or Does It?

During the first five centuries of the early Church there was quickly identified a need to better express the views of the Church in a clear and concise manner to refute teachings viewed as other than orthodox. To this end Morrison writes,

But it was especially the threat of the heresies of Marcionism, Gnosticism, and Montanism which called forth extensive clarification of “the faith,” and so the church’s “pattern of authority,” especially via the extensive writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian in the West, and Clement of Alexandria and Origen in the East, despite distinctive emphases among them.... A further issue regards the principles by which these revelatory media were to be interpreted by the church (“the rule of faith”). Differing interpretations necessitated criteria by which the church could judge teachings to be orthodox or heretical.<sup>11</sup>

Thus it might be fair to claim that the early years of Christianity were marked with the very same issues to be found in the modern era. Not unlike the “then,” “now” one finds groups laying claim

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<sup>9</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Moisés Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Kaiser, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> John D. Morrison, *Has God Said?*, ed. David W. Baker (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006), 250-251.

to the title of being a Christian while denying the deity of Jesus, the humanity of Jesus, a physical resurrection, or a host of other emphases. It was issues such as these that moved the Church to proffer the rule of faith. Williams notes,

Simply put, the faith articulated during the first five centuries set into place two pillars of authority on which Christians have stood: an apostolic canon of Scripture (the Bible), and a theological canon of apostolicity (cardinal doctrines and confessions of the Trinity, Christology, etc.). The first has to do with the process of codifying the collection of the New Testament, and that is not complete without the Old Testament. . . . The second, a theological canon of apostolicity, refers to the forms in which the early church laid down the baseline of essential Christian truths: confessions, creeds, doctrines, interpretations of the Bible, hymns, and so on.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, of “the rule,” Morrison notes, “The *regula* is both doctrinal and hermeneutical, i.e., it sets the interpretational boundaries beyond which Christian teachers must not go.”<sup>13</sup>

#### Second-Order Stipulation

Finally, whereas *exegesis and interpretation* denote the *actual processes* of interpreting texts, *hermeneutics* also includes the second-order discipline of asking critically *what exactly we are doing when we read, understand, or apply* texts. Hermeneutics explores *the conditions and criteria* that operate to try to ensure responsible, valid, fruitful, or appropriate interpretations. This shows why, once again, hermeneutics has to call on various academic disciplines. It shows why we draw on philosophical questions about how we understand; psychological, social, and critical questions about selfhood, self-interest, and self-deception. (Emphasis is in the original text.)<sup>14</sup>

Thiselton makes clear that in order to perform the act of interpreting a passage, one is obligated to move beyond merely espousing a particular reading without also providing the reader with the justification for why that construal should be the preferred understanding of the text. Thus, it is recognized that any proposed pillars of hermeneutics set forth today – as specifically related to how one understands the Bible - must not rely solely on the particular

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<sup>12</sup> D. H. Williams, ed., *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation: A Sourcebook of the Ancient Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 23.

<sup>13</sup> Morrison, *Has God Said?* 266.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 4.

biases brought by the reader, but must also contain some justification as to why that criterion has been chosen and the necessity of such as a pillar.

Here a concern must be addressed, for if hermeneutics is a second-order discipline, then what one derives as a hermeneutical pillar will determine what one ought or ought not believe about the first-order discipline, or in this case, Scripture. Such could indeed cause significant angst for the reader when, by way of example, one begins examining passages concerning miracles. While acknowledging this possible challenge, it is suggested that such a contest is unwarranted, for the purpose behind hermeneutics is to find what the text means, and to presuppose that miracles do not or have not happened is for the reader to be guilty of philosophical eisegesis. As such, this type of challenge is unfounded and should not deter one from seeking to understand the meaning as found within the text.

#### The Faith of a Child

Before proposing a set of hermeneutical principles for use when interpreting Scripture, this writer finds it necessary to suggest a final overarching parameter. Without giving the indication that there is a belief that interpretation does not matter, it would serve the exegete well to remember that we are not the author of the message, and therefore we may not have all of the answers related to what the text means in its fullness. This should not be interpreted that no meaning might be gleaned, rather that at some points within Scripture one must hold interpretations modestly and tentatively, subject to correction. Two passages are offered in support of this position.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”<sup>2</sup> He called a little child and had him stand among them.<sup>3</sup> And he said: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the

kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>15</sup>

Jesus calls for His followers to have the faith of a child, with the surface level reading being plain. What happens, though, when one considers Paul's letter to the Romans, and in particular Romans 14? Paul begins the chapter by stating, "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters." (Ro 14:1) Scripture, it is suggested, is abundantly clear with regard to some matters, and with others it would appear that God has allowed man to exercise his free will in choosing a path: neither path chosen may be wrong, God has just allowed a choice. With this thought in mind it is believed that where possible, hermeneutical pillars must be sound enough to provide adequate structure while at the same time avoiding an unwarranted dogma.

### **Proposed Pillars**

#### Reading in Context

In the case of different categories of biblical texts, there remain some texts which cannot be up-anchored from the contextual setting in life and history, which decisively shapes their meaning. In such passages this setting imposes constraints on the range of interpretative options which remain open to the responsible reader. The argument put forward by Stout and by Morgan that the reader or interpreter has liberty to choose whether what he or she regards as "the meaning of the text" is true only, up to a point, in a secondary or derivative sense. It is true in the sense that the interpreter's hermeneutical goals inevitably determine what counts as "the meaning of the text," at least within a given framework.<sup>16</sup>

Thirteen years later Vanhoozer would take Thiselton's comments an additional step. In citing Gadamer, Vanhoozer contends that Gadamer's point was that in interpreting a specific

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<sup>15</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), Mt 18:1–4.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 66.

case, one utilizes what may be considered universal norms, or rules.<sup>17</sup> What are these norms, and how does one differentiate between that which is normative and that which is derivative? While there may indeed be differing rules based on the various linguistic styles which may be in play – that is to say, various genres of writing – that which is universally normative is to read narratives in context. Poetry remains poetry and should be read as such, and the same would hold for the Gospels, prophecy, and apocalyptic passages.

Reading a text in context allows the reader to recognize what the original author was saying, and while the plain language may well provide one level of understanding, it may still be deficient in disclosing the full richness of what was in mind at the time. While reading in context is but the starting point, and one which helps establish boundaries against unintentional error, context serves to gaining a more robust understanding of Scripture as a whole.

Virkler suggests that the following three questions, when asked of the text, will aid the reader in better understanding the context: 1) What is the general historical milieu in which the writer speaks? and; 2) What is the specific historical-cultural context and purpose of this book?; and 3) What is the immediate context of the passage under consideration?<sup>18</sup> If these three questions are to be taken as normative, then context is not determined by connotation alone or even the particular sequence of words as found on a page. Context includes what was happening at that particular time in the author's life when the text was originally penned and as such adds color to the literal reading.

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<sup>17</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 327.

<sup>18</sup> Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981), 79.

## Richness of Language

Because language is not static or wooden, man finds a variety of means by which to express thoughts through language. In a similar fashion, God is a God with personality and emotion and it would appear reasonable to believe that He incorporated a variety of linguistic mechanisms in His self-expression. In turning to Kannengiesser one finds eight examples of different types of “spiritual exegesis” as understood and used by the fathers (although only six are referenced here). Summarily, one must allow the text to speak for itself, recognizing the variety and value of these forms of exegesis and then as based on the actual text of Scripture. These six are not pillars themselves, but are sub-categories within this pillar that allow for a much fuller understanding as a whole.

### *Literal*

When reading for the literal meaning of the text, it is understood that if a text can be read literally and make sense, then it should be read as such. A literal reading will recognize and be based upon the belief that God has acted in the course of history and, as a result, the text points to actual events. Because the Bible is the message from God to man, and because it points to Jesus, that message has the ability to transcend the literal and, as such, a text may have a deeper spiritual meaning. The literal reading is the starting point for all exegesis and hermeneutics.

### *Allegory*

Allegory was used by many of the fathers as a means for “decoding” the spiritual meaning from within the text. Justification for such an approach came from passages such as Galatians 4 where Paul spoke of Sarah and Hagar as being an allegory, a literal text possessing a deeper spiritual meaning. While allegory may be a valid linguistic tool, and recognizing that the fathers grounded their allegory on the literal passage, one is wise to heed the caution of Vanhoozer who states of allegory today, “The new allegorism locates textual meaning not in a

system of higher truths, but in a sea of indeterminacy.”<sup>19</sup> Here the focus of the fathers appears to have been to distinguish between speech and thought in much the same way that the modern man may distinguish between the letter and spirit of a law. Allegory was for many of the fathers the means for identifying everything that Scripture had to say that was other than literal. One must have a means for handling text that, on the literal reading, simply cannot be true (this does not address miracles or God’s ability to act) or does not make sense.

### ***History***

What does history teach today about the events of yesterday, and how did those historical events impact mankind as he related to God? More will be said shortly about eschatology, but if the Bible points to God’s ultimate plan for mankind (e.g., the crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus as found in the Gospels, and then the parousia, resurrection, and eternal states in the epistles), then how did the historical elements color the communication not only of the Apostles, but also of the fathers? By examining history one gains a richer understanding of the rhetorical-grammatical tradition as used by those who penned the New Testament, of the audience, or the fathers that follow.

### ***Typology***

“Type” is a reference to real and objective data. The only case per Kannengiesser where typology is used in a theological sense is Romans 5:14 where Adam was called a type.<sup>20</sup> Typology refers to real and objective data, thus when typology is used of Scripture, there is an implicit understanding that the passage under review actually happened in history. The “type” indicated in Scripture was then a picture of something God would do in the future. Typology is

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<sup>19</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 120.

<sup>20</sup> Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 229.

fixed upon actual historical events, and as such was considered *a priori* evidence on the part of the exegete and is the distinguishing mark that separates this linguistic mechanism from allegory.

### ***Tropology***

This indicates the use of figurative language, and is hard to differentiate from typology. Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia both used this and further defined tropology by way of explaining that there may have been a change in meaning over time, such as when a prophet spoke: there was an immediate sense, and then there was a final fulfillment of the prophecy at a later time in history. The exegete today is most likely to understand tropology in terms of metaphors, hyperbole, and other similar linguistic instruments.

### ***Anagoge***

This view was to go above and beyond literalism, and was used by advocates for both allegory and typology and sought to identify higher levels of meaning within the text. Ultimately it was applied to the examination or anticipation of the Eternal States, and may be considered as a link connecting the literal and the spiritual. As with the earlier comments on history, this would indicate a need for eschatology as a pillar for sound hermeneutics.<sup>21</sup>

### Standing on the Shoulders

It is the tradition or apostolic preaching that formed the basis of the New Testament and served as the hermeneutical model for interpreting the Old Testament. As the body of this tradition developed over the next three to four centuries, it was understood as that which bears witness to and interprets Scripture. Whether it was the baptismal formulas, catechetical summaries, or the later creeds, these all were valued as accurately representing the purport of Scripture.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 206-258.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation*, 27.

Stating the obvious, Christianity is not a new system of belief. A careful reading of the early Church fathers would reveal quickly the debates and challenges that were faced in the first five centuries as they sought to better verbalize and define what it meant to be a Christian in light of what was found in the pages of Scripture. It is here suggested that the dialogues and debates that the fathers engaged and their subsequent responses make for appropriate pillars.

### ***Regula Fidei***

Apostolic tradition and written Scriptures were “twin,” interrelated sources of authoritative teaching.... The second heresy Gnosticism, with its claim to a “secret apostolic tradition” *beyond* that affirmed by the church, forced the church to articulate the core of apostolic teaching, especially in the *regula fidei*, the (apostolic) “rule of faith” (or “truth”). This “rule” gave hermeneutical regulation / guidance to those who would be faithful to the church’s apostolic deposit.<sup>23</sup>

This “core” of apostolic teaching would appear to remain a valid tool for interpretation today. The justification for such a comment need go no further than to recognize that point of origin for what has become orthodox Christianity was never anything other than Scripture. Moreover, one cannot miss the critical point that *regula fidei* came into being as the result of attacks against Christianity, those attacks alleging that there was something more – something hidden from the masses and yet within the pages of Scripture – and only a select few may know the true secrets of God. Thus, one could say *regula fidei* became both the starting and ending point for all exegetical and hermeneutical work as it related, both then and now, to Scripture. Deviation in exegesis or hermeneutics from *regula fidei* is to dismiss the work of the Councils and believers of the first five centuries of Christianity. Such dismissal would demand the burden of proof be laid upon the one who would abandon *regula fidei* in favor of any other hermeneutical platform.

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<sup>23</sup> Morrison, *Has God Said?* 256.

### *Paradidomi*

Regarding “tradition” or a “rule of faith,” Clement does use the verb *paradidomi* (to hand over) but not in the sense of “tradition” or handing over teaching. The noun form is combined with *kanon* one where he says: “Let us come to the glorious and venerable *rule* of our tradition.” Lightfoot comments that “there seems to be no thought in Clement of a creed or rule of faith,” as would soon develop because of heresy. The context is more ethical than doctrinal. So while Clement makes much use of OT and apostolic tradition, especially the life of Christ, and uses a creedlike statement (“Have we not one God, and one Christ, and one Spirit of grace”), which echoes Ephesians 4, there is no knowledge of a concrete rule or confession other than the Scriptures.<sup>24</sup>

Because Protestant denominations account for such a large portion of the believing community, one cannot ignore the challenge brought of tradition. Herein Morrison points to tradition not in the sense of the Roman Catholic teaching magisterium, a group holding that both the written form of Scripture and oral traditions are equally prescriptive for the believer. Instead he references both Scripture and an early father as being in agreement that by tradition one is indicating the handing over of Scripture from one generation to the next, with the clear understanding that Scripture does not change as it is handed down.

Such a distinction cannot serve to separate the Protestant denominations from that of Roman Catholicism, thus creating an “us” versus “them” mentality, for one must remember that in standing on the shoulders of those who came before, both the Protestant and the Roman Catholic are standing on the shoulders of these the early Church fathers. Neither Luther nor Calvin argued for the dismissal of these fathers and indeed were fighting for the return to the earlier understanding of what it means to be Christian, the dispute centering on Church leadership gone wrong. Thus, and in the vein of Barth, tradition is to be understood as the

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<sup>24</sup> Morrison, *Has God Said?* 257-258. Here Dr. Morrison notes that his source material related to Lightfoot came from 1 Clement 7:2 in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1 (London: MacMillan, 1885-90) 60; of Clement he cites 1 Clement 46:6.

passing down from one generation to the next that Word of God which is a witness to the revealed Word of God.

### Eschatological Impact

How one understands eschatology will, by necessity, color all other facets of understanding Scripture. All religions – atheism included – seek to explain what happens to man at the point of death or at the end of time. History tells mankind where we have been, but does it also point to where we are going? If one reads Scripture, is there a reason to believe that within the text there is a message that indicates how the story will end? While suggesting such a pillar is dicey at best, it is argued that this very pillar is unavoidable. It is further suggested that while eschatology is offered as a pillar, it is perhaps a second level pillar, with eschatological assessments still having to pass through the pillars of context, richness of language, and history.

What *is* being advocated at this point by the inclusion of this pillar is truly the final states and not necessarily the various understandings of how one actually arrives at one of those two stations, being either eternity in Heaven or in Hell. In retrospect one finds in Daniel a timeline pointing the Jewish people to the coming of the Messiah, but no such chronological indicator exists for calculating the second coming. Many sound biblical scholars disagree with respect to a pre- post- or mid-tribulation rapture of the Church. Without a clear message as found within the pages of Scripture one must return to Romans 14 and allow for disputable matters. Here the challenge is not to the sound biblical scholar, but to those who would operate outside *regula fidei* and, by way of example, in the line of John Hick's suggestion Universal Salvationism, extinction of the consciousness, or a host of other views that exclude eternal punishment or reward as found in Scripture. If one believes that all persons will be saved, or that this life is all that there is, then such beliefs will by necessity color how the balance of Scripture is understood. Thus, a right

understanding of what Scripture, and the fathers in light of Scripture, teach about what happens after death is necessary for rightly dividing the Word of God. Such is the foundation.

In summary, what has been offered are four primary pillars from which to initiate the work of hermeneutics. While the four are not by any means exhaustive, it is believed that in establishing these as the artificial cornerstones, one will be better equipped to determine the meaning within the text. Reading in context recognizes how the sequencing of particular words forms coherent, understandable thoughts as put forth by another person. While the literal sense of the text may indeed convey meaning, allowing the fullness of language, that is to say when allegory, history, typology, tropology, and anagoge are allowed to come to the dance, the result is a depth and richness unattainable by simply sequencing words. Such richness allows for the communication of not only the physical and immediate, but also the conceptual and paradoxical. In affixing the pillar of history to the practice of hermeneutics, by default one brings the protective boundaries of *regula fidei* and *paradidomi* as understood by the fathers that in turn establish what may be understood as the usual and customary manner for the handling of specific information. Finally, with the decision to include eschatology as a hermeneutical pillar one is forced to evaluate their own understanding of the end times and, as a result, reflect on how their understanding of the eternal states impacts the way in which Scripture is explained.

## *PARADIDOMI*: REGARDING TOMORROW

When considering the information that can be known about the lives and scholarly pursuits of the early fathers, and then coupled with the proposed hermeneutical pillars, what should the course be for the current theologian? If *paradidomi* meant the handing down from one generation to the next the Christian faith, in particular that faith that had been received by the fathers from the Church leadership back to and inclusive of the apostles, then what constitutes the right handling of Scripture today?

It would be all too easy in a relativistic, pluralistic, tolerant society to call the fathers but a fading echo from the past. Far too much ink may be spilled in evaluating and refuting the various modern positions, so the focus shall be on what might constitute the proper handing down of the Christian faith today. Countless thousands of pages have been written on the Christian faith and passing along that same belief, so the proposal herein should be held loosely, subject to the proper inclusion of other elements where warranted, and correction where needed.

Starting at the beginning would be a prudent move at this time. In turning to Paul one reads that he desired not to build upon a foundation other than that of Jesus (Ro 15:20). In similar fashion he told the Ephesians they were members of God's house, with that house having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus as the Chief Cornerstone (Eph 2:20). To Timothy, Paul wrote the message that Christians might know that the Church is the foundation of truth, but he also stated that the house was God's (1 Tim 3:15). Thus, it would not appear unjustified to state that Paul held the view that everything the Church would say or do in the name of Christianity must have a foundation based on the person and teaching of Jesus.

Paul was not the only one to write of the foundation being none other than God. Isaiah called the cornerstone a sure foundation worthy of trust (Isa 28:16) and later he spoke of this

foundation as a store of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge (Isa 33:6). The challenge at this point is to determine what the application might be from the study of Scripture and the fathers.

The first point must be one that addresses epistemic access. Where is one to gain information and knowledge about the very foundation of Christianity and, if it were true, the stable and unchanging platform found therein? If Scripture is but the work of men of unusual religious insight, writing on religious subjects in the same way men like Shakespeare or Schiller wrote literature,<sup>25</sup> then there is little on which to claim a singular foundation upon which Christian knowledge is based. If, on the other hand, Paul and Isaiah were correct and there is a singular foundation upon which both Christianity today, and God's people in the Old Testament pursued, then epistemic access is to be found in the message as provided by the apostles and prophets. This is not to say that no additional knowledge may be gleaned from extra-biblical sources, rather the starting point remained the same for the fifteen hundred years in which the Bible was penned and holds true even today.

Like the fathers, the theologian today must begin with the literal reading of the words on the pages of the Bible. Even the Alexandrian school with its propensity to utilize allegory as a means for interpretation still relied on the actual text. Kannengiesser notes that the literal understanding was indispensable for those who would hold to the Alexandrian teaching. As such, the burden of proof would rest with anyone today who would purport deviating from this standard.

Second, scholars of today do not have the luxury of superimposing a twenty-first century mindset onto the data presented by the apostles and fathers. Stated differently, it is inappropriate for individuals to bring their personal agenda to the table of interpretation. This is certainly not to say that any individual has attained a God's eye view of the situation, rather this is intended to

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<sup>25</sup> Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 160.

target movements that would prioritize feminist, liberation, or any other theology over the literal sense of the text. To suggest a new theology today which emphasizes specialized movements over the priority of the Scriptural message from Jesus, the apostles, prophets, and understanding of the fathers is to create a dichotomy where one does not exist. Justification for this statement is based on the message of Jesus to all mankind, and not a message bifurcated along sexual, economic, political, or other strata.

To return to the fathers for insight and instruction about the function of the Church as well as what it meant to be a Christian is to call for a return to the roots of Christianity and, perhaps the abandonment of denominational strife. Such a return does not imply an egalitarian construct, for it is here suggested that egalitarian societies may be spoken of, but may never be actualized as a state of affairs, even in the eternal states, for there will always be a ruler and the ruled. The value of studying the fathers is to seek to understand the very roots of the Church, the challenges that were brought against her two millennia ago, and perhaps recognize how today old arguments have been given a fresh coat of paint and portrayed as a new challenge. As with the early Church, there are those who would deny the deity or humanity of Jesus today. Those who espoused such heretical beliefs so many years ago were soundly refuted, and it is suggested that the Church today has simply neglected to study her heritage and as a result is ill-equipped to stand against the modern heresies and schisms.

Finally, it is thought that the theologian today, in establishing appropriate hermeneutical pillars, coupled with an acknowledgment of the roots of the Church from Pentecost forward, could lead the Church to recognize the sizeable ground upon which orthodoxy agrees, even in light of the Roman Catholic – Protestant – Denominational divisions. The fathers defended the Church with the intent of continuing what was started when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost.

Recognizing all of the good, the bad, and the ugly that has been committed by men in the name of the Church, it must not be missed that the failures of men do not serve as an indictment against Jesus Christ, nor do they serve to impugn the command of Jesus to go and make disciples, teaching them to obey everything that He had taught those who followed Him during His earthly ministry.

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