



Hall, Christopher A.

Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth
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Christopher A. Hall is Provost of Eastern University and Dean of the Templeton Honors College, as well as an associate editor of IVP's *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* series (along with Thomas C. Oden). What he has delivered with *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* is an accessible introduction to both the Church Fathers and their exegesis.

Hall begins by noting the Protestant tendency to seek fresh (i.e., novel) readings of Scripture in breaking with tradition. He sees this as a result of the Enlightenment and its emphasis on reason. He notes that:

The deep-seated Protestant suspicion of tradition and its confidence in the ability of renewed reason alone to understand Scripture will lead many to shy away from investing time and energy in exploring patristic thought, believing it better to focus on the world of the Bible itself. (31)

He rightly views this as a problem, and suggests that the solution is to engage the great theologians, pastors, and doctors of the Church that have come before us. Hall in no way suggests that the Fathers were monolithic in their belief, or that they were always correct in their interpretation, but they are a necessary voice to be listened to, a voice that gives us insight into the past. The emphasis needs to be taken off the autonomy of each individual interpreter and placed back on the witness of the Church at large. Hall says that: "*the fathers believed the best exegesis occurs within the community of the church.*" (42)

In chapter three Hall outlines 4 key characteristics that qualifies an early Christian writer as a "Church Father." They are:

1. Antiquity
2. Holiness of life

3. Orthodox doctrine
4. Ecclesiastical approval

He spends the next two chapters introducing the reader to the great doctors of the East: Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil the Great, and John Chrysostom (chapter 4), and the great doctors of the West: Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory the Great (chapter 5). These introductions involve a brief mini-biography and a summary of their written works as it pertains to their exegesis of Scripture, what he calls a “hermeneutic sampler.” Hall notes the agreement between all of these Fathers concerning various doctrines and beliefs such as: (1) the inspiration of Scripture, (2) once an interpretation of Scripture is reached it summons the interpreter to obedience, (3) Biblical interpretation is a communal endeavor, (4) exegesis is never to be practiced in a historical, traditional, or communal vacuum. (132)

In chapter six he discusses exegesis at Alexandria and as is to be expected focuses most of his attention on the allegorical method and Origen. In Origen’s thought, the advanced student of Scripture would be able see the deeper spiritual meaning of the text, while the babe in Christ would only be able to see the literal meaning. Hall notes that for Origen, the remedy to running wild with allegory was to be saturated in the Biblical text and to let Scripture interpret Scripture. He says:

Because Origen was convinced of Scripture’s inspiration, he was confident that the Bible’s own symbolic range would prevent him from overstepping his bounds as he searched for the Bible’s deeper sense. (154)

As noble an idea as this is, I don’t see the practical value of it. Even if Scripture does limit the amount of symbolism that can found in it, who’s to say that the proper symbols are being employed in the interpretation of certain texts? Hall examined Origen’s interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan earlier in the chapter and showed that such a problem did indeed exist for Origen.

In the seventh chapter Hall details the “response of Antioch” to Alexandrian exegesis. Here he notes how what we would now call the historical-grammatical hermeneutic was favored by the Antiochenes, and while they railed against allegorical interpretations, they didn’t deny that the literal interpretation excludes a higher meaning, called “*theoria*.” Using Diodore of Tarsus as his example, Hall says:

Diodore argues that “history is not opposed to *theoria*. On the contrary, it proves to be the foundation and the basis of the higher senses.” A key aspect of *theoria*, however, is that it never eliminates or ignores the underlying literal and historical sense. If it did so it “would then be no longer *theoria* but allegory. For wherever anything else is said apart from the foundational sense, we have not *theoria* but allegory.” (160-61)

Hall closes the book with a chapter on “making sense of patristic exegesis” in which he calls the reader to listen attentively to the Fathers while not uncritically accepting

everything they say. He calls for Christians to remember that they are part of a multi-generational body of believers and to neglect the exegesis of those who came before us can be detrimental. We are to “*read the Bible communally within Christ’s body, the church.*” (194) He also calls for us to read the Scriptures holistically as the Fathers did (191). And finally, what I found to be the most pertinent bit, was Hall’s call to “*read the Bible within the context and practice of prayer, worship and spiritual formation.*” (195) Sadly, this is an area in which I have slacked, but this is just the type of reminder I need to get me going again.

Unfortunately this book has no bibliography and employs end notes which I hate to no end! There’s a five page general index and a one page Scripture index. In the chapter on Alexandrian exegesis, Hall opted to mostly quote Origen from secondary sources which I didn’t understand. This was a criticism I had of his later work *The Trinity* which he co-authored with Roger Olsen. Is this a sign of authorial laziness? I don’t know. But overall this is a solid introduction to some of the major Church Fathers of the East and West. I would have preferred it to be a bit more comprehensive, but I understand and respect the choice to limit it as Hall has done. I believe that anyone interested in Patristic exegesis would do well to begin with this volume.