

Doing Church With the “Early Fathers”: The Church Living Out Its Faith

Doing Church with Irenaeus of Lyon: The Church Living Under Scripture

II Peter 1:3-21

I want to begin tonight by reading Peter’s second letter beginning in verse three of chapter one down to verse twenty-one.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have. ¹³I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning

star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The gospel communities that were spreading all over the Roman empire would have been challenged on a number of fronts. They would have social, cultural and religious "issues" in every community regardless of their particular local or ethnic backgrounds. The gospel, and its understanding in the Scripture, was to be the only ground for life and living. Peter is reminding his readers of the sufficiency of the Scriptures to inform and sustain their own "walk with Jesus" in this life. Their commitment to the Scriptures was to be held more securely than experience, even those experienced by Peter himself as he walked with Jesus.

And, we are to be frequently reminded of these things. We should continue to read, listen and study the word. None of us has spiritually "arrived". That is why we offer Bible classes on Sunday mornings, we gather for worship around the "hearing of the word" both on Sunday morning and on Sunday evening. We sit together in flocks in the middle of the week to remind ourselves of our living together in light of the Word. We have discipleship groups, bible studies and other opportunities for us to be reminded of the truth and to practice it consistently.

We have spent the past few evenings looking at four historical figures from the very early days of Christianity. We have tried to see how Christians were applying the message of the gospel and interpreting the Scriptures in the late first and early second centuries with the will intent that this will help us as we tackle different yet in many ways similar concerns. The philosopher George Santayana's statement, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" reminds us that the experiences of the past, its mistakes and failures, are training grounds for growth and change in the present and then for the future.

Our last individual I want to introduce to you in this series, "Doing Church with the Fathers" is Irenaeus of Lyon. He is a bit later than our other figures. He was born as early as 115 and as late as 142 AD. Even though he served in and came to be known as from Lyon, a city in what is now southern France and he is thought to have been from Smyrna, the city of Polycarp. In his writings he indicates that he was brought up in a family that was Christian rather than pagan.

Irenaeus stated that he heard Polycarp preach when he was younger. As a student of Polycarp, who was a direct disciple of the Apostle John, he believed that he was interpreting scriptures in the same hermeneutic as the Apostles. This connection to Christ was important to Irenaeus because both he and the Gnostics based their arguments on Scripture. Irenaeus argued that since he could trace his authority to Christ and the Gnostics could not, his interpretation of

Scripture was correct. His role was to authenticate orthodox teachings through his reputed connection ultimately to the apostle John: "a high value was attached to the witness Polycarp could give as to the genuine tradition of old apostolic doctrine"

Almost all of his writings were against false teaching, in particular a philosophy known as Gnosticism. There are several versions of Gnosticism but their main teachings involved a "higher knowledge" leading to a "higher spirituality" that went beyond this physical world. Because of this, one of their main teachings was to separate the man Jesus from his role as the "Word". The physical realm must not taint Jesus' divinity.

The most famous of Irenaeus' writings is known in English as *Against Heresies*. In this extended treatise he argued extensively against very specific false teaching and demonstrated the mishandling of Scripture used by his opponents. His use of Scripture is very thorough and comprehensive. In his writings he classified as Scripture not only the Old Testament but most of the books now known as the New Testament. He very clearly excluded many works, several by Gnostics, which claimed scriptural authority.

I want to read excerpts, abridged from Book III of his *Against Heresies* to illustrate his thinking.

But in this third book I shall adduce proofs from the Scriptures so that I may come behind in nothing of what you have enjoyed...Call to mind then, the things which I have stated in the two preceding books, and, taking these in connection with them, you shall have from me a very copious refutation of all the heretics; and faithfully and strenuously shall you resist them in defense of the only true and life-giving faith with the church has received from the apostles. For the Lord of all gave to his apostles the power of the gospel through whom also we have known the truth that is the doctrine of the Son of God; to whom also did the Lord declare that He that hear you hears me....We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith... In the time of Clement, no small dissension occurred among the brethren at Corinth. The Church in Rome dispatched a most powerful letter to the Corinthians, exhorting them to peace, renewing their faith and declaring the tradition which it had lately received from the apostles, proclaiming the one God, omnipotent, the Maker of heaven and earth, the creator of man, who brought on the deluge, and called Abraham, who led the people from the land of Egypt, spoke with Moses, set forth the law, sent the prophets and who has

prepared fire for the devil and his angels. From this document whosoever chooses to do so, may learn that He, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, was preached by the churches ...

So from Irenaeus we should be encouraged to note his reliance on Scripture as the ground of our faith. We are not to be misled by false teachers, experiences or false writings, but to rest solidly on the Scriptures and their proper teaching.

So how does that impact and inform us to live as a church, trusting the Scriptures?

We must have confidence in the Scriptures. We must grasp the idea that God has given us, in the Scriptures, all we need for life and godliness. We do not need any more.

We must know the Scriptures. But to apply and live out this godliness, we must read, study and meditate on those Scriptures. This may take some work on our parts to get the message right.

We must look to Jesus from the Scriptures. Jesus and His gospel is the focal point of Scripture. Understanding the implications and extensions of the gospel enables us to see more clearly the meaning, purpose and application of the Scripture.

We must apply the Scriptures. Indeed we need to be willing then to make this meaning real in our lives and not merely give a nod of assent and then create our own alternative way to reach God.

We must share in the growth in knowledge of Scriptures. This is a community event, done together with the help of Godly teachers and leaders.

I have introduced us to and read excerpts from Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Clement of Rome and Irenaeus of Lyon. I chose these individuals because they illustrate an interconnection with each other and with the apostles, particularly Paul and John. The hope was that, reflecting on the struggles and emphases that these men had, we would have a renewed confidence as we struggle with applying the Scripture to life and that we would indeed do church with energy and faith, indeed living out our faith in the gospel, as community, with leadership by the Scriptures.