

The Growth Institute: Historical Theology

1/18/23 Week 2: Theology and Missiology from AD 33-100

What is the relationship between theology and missiology?

The earliest “church” in the NT age (Matthew 16:13-20, Matthew 18:15-20, Acts 2, Acts 5:1-11, Acts 8:1 & 3):

How problems were handled:

Distribution of food (Acts 6:1-7)

Taking the gospel to Gentiles and food (Acts 11:1-18)

Circumcision and other rules (Acts 15:1-35)

Paul, Barnabas, Mark, and Silas (Acts 15:36-41)

Epistles to Churches

The 7 letters to churches in Revelation

Who became believers?

Marks of the early church:

(Apostolic) Preaching

Baptism (Acts 2:37-41, 8:10-13, 8:34-39, 9:17-19; 10:47-48; 16:31-34; 18:8; 19:1-5)

Lord's Supper

Sunday assemblies

How were leaders appointed:

Servants (deacons?) Acts 6:1-7:

Missionaries (Acts 13:1-4):

Elders (Acts 14:21-23):

Recommended reading:

Further Resources

From this week:

Green, Michael. *Evangelism in the Early Church*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003.

Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. New York: Harper One, 1996.

To prepare for next week: [Patristic Theology - The Gospel Coalition](#) (see attached)

For the semester:

Duesing, Jason and Nathan Finn. *Historical Theology For The Church*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2021.

Duesing, Jason. *Seven Summits in Church History*. Nashville, TN: Rainer Publishing, 2016.

Ferguson, Everett. *Church History, Volume One: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013.

Litfin, Bryan. *Getting to Know The Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016.

BLOGS

[HTTPS://WWW.THEGOSPELCOALITION.ORG/BLOGS/TREVIN-WAX/THE-RISE-OF-CHRISTIANITY-A-SUMMARY-OF-RODNEY-STARKS-PROPOSAL/](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/the-rise-of-christianity-a-summary-of-rodney-starks-proposal/)

The Rise of Christianity: A Summary of Rodney Stark's Proposal

TREVIN WAX MARCH 4, 2013

When we as Christians consider the coming of Christ and the rise of Christianity, we tend to focus on the spiritual forces at work – the powerful preaching of the gospel, the apostles' martyrdom for the faith, and the evangelistic attraction of the early church's common life together.

A book like *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York: Harper One, 1996) by Rodney Stark may seem unusual at first, as it traces the sociological factors in the rise of Christian belief and practice.

Today, I'm going to summarize the case Stark makes for the rise of Christianity and then tomorrow, I'll offer some points of application for our churches.

Summary

Rodney Stark wisely begins his book by acknowledging the helpfulness and also the limitations of social science.

"No sacrilege is entailed in the search to understand human actions in human terms. Moreover, I do not reduce the rise of Christianity to purely 'material' or social factors" (4).

Nowhere is Stark seeking to deny the Christian belief that God was at work in the beginning of the Christian movement. Instead, he wants to examine the means by which this rapid growth occurred. He believes social science will put an end to some of the common, persistent myths about Christianity's rapid growth.

For example, examining the constant rate of growth of Christian believers, Stark questions the often-assumed link between Constantine's conversion and the Roman Empire having a Christian majority.

"Constantine's conversion would better be seen as a response to the massive exponential wave in progress, not as its cause" (10).

Why Does a Religious Movement Grow?

So what factors are at play in the rapid rise of a religious movement? There are certain social dynamics that must be examined.

- Networks of family and friends play a huge role in conversion. Stark sees conversion as being more likely when "people have or develop stronger attachments to members of the group than they have to nonmembers" (18).
- Stark also notes that "new religious movements mainly draw their converts from the ranks of the religiously inactive and discontented, and those affiliated with the most accommodated (worldly) religious communities" (19).
- The implication of this migration from one religious affiliation to another is that the middle and privileged classes are more inclined to convert than the lowest classes. "New religions must always make their way in the market openings left them by weaknesses in the conventional religion(s) of a society," Stark writes, and "religious skepticism is most prevalent among the more privileged" (37). Why is this the case? Stark believes the class of people most likely to understand the new religion and see the need for its beliefs will be the most economically privileged (39).

Christianity and Judaism

Stark's sociological study of the rise of early Christianity would be incomplete without an in depth treatment of the relationship between Judaism and the early church. Rather than seeing the relationship as inherently hostile, Stark makes the case for an intertwined Jewish and Christian identity, as large numbers of Jews converted to Christianity from the first to the fifth centuries (49). To make this case, Stark spends an entire chapter sketching the reasons why scholars have assumed a low rate of conversion among faithful Jews. Then, in light of new sociological findings, Stark counters the conventional wisdom and makes the case that large numbers did indeed convert peacefully.

Chaos and the Need for Stability

Another role in the burgeoning Christian movement was played by social crises, brought in the wake of disastrous plagues or in the common chaos of urban life. During the early centuries of Christian growth, a series of natural disasters (including earthquakes and epidemics) disrupted the Roman Empire. Stark believes “Christianity offered a much more satisfactory account of why these terrible times had fallen upon humanity, and it projected a hopeful, even enthusiastic, portrait of the future” (74). These explanations helped Christians cope with the disasters, which in turn helped Christians survive at higher rates than pagans.

Furthermore, the massive numbers of those who died disrupted the normal social bonds that would have attached people to their families and neighbors. Because Christians were more likely to survive the plagues, pagans found new friendships with Christians whose faith would have been appealing in the midst of such turmoil (75).

Stark also points out the chaos associated with urban living during this period of history. Life in the city was one of disease, misery and fear, providing Christians with the opportunity not only to imagine a better world in the distant future but also solutions for present-day problems (149).

The Role of Godly Women

Another factor in the rise of early Christianity centers on the role of women in the early church. Because of Christianity’s prohibition of infanticide and abortion, Christian families were more likely to raise up daughters in the faith. High rates of intermarriage between Christian women and pagan men brought about “secondary” conversions to Christianity, not to mention the likelihood of children being brought up in the church (95).

What about the Martyrs?

Christian historians often point to the testimony of the martyrs as a major reason for the rise of Christianity. Stark does not discount the role of martyrdom, but he puts it into perspective.

For example, he counters the irrationalist vision of martyrdom that sees persecuted people as clinging so tightly to their personal faith they make irrational choices that lead to their demise. Stark believes the martyrs saw their sacrifice as the best choice, given their belief in the rewards they would gain in return (167). Likewise, "martyrs are the most credible exponents of the value of a religion, and this is especially true if there is a voluntary aspect to their martyrdom" (174). But Stark also counters the common Christian perspective by showing how the number of martyrs was never very large, and the persecutions that took place broke out intermittently and never focused on all Christians everywhere.

Patristic Theology

AN ESSAY BY

Coleman Ford

DEFINITION

A study in the understanding of God, His revelation, and His work as expressed by thinkers in early centuries of the Church.

SUMMARY

This essay will survey emphases and sources of theological reasoning in the first centuries of the Christian church and conclude with some reflections for today's Christian.

Introduction

The essence of patristic theology was true and sincere worship of the Triune God understood through the redemptive plan of God in Scripture centered on the incarnate Word of God. The theory that the church fathers were merely Platonizing philosophers seeking to blindly marry Hellenism to Scripture, a theory proposed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, simply does not stack up against their biblically saturated writings. Philosophy and literature served the Church, not the other way around. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215) remarked, “Every place and every time in which we entertain the idea of God is in reality sacred” (*Miscellanies* 7.7). The Scriptures were the lifeblood of theological reflection, guided by the apostolic interpretative scheme represented in the *regula fidei* (rule of faith). Scripture informed the liturgy of the church reinforced by the apostolic deposit of faith, alongside regular preaching guided by the belief that Christ was the key to understanding the entire Bible. Theological reflection in the patristic tradition was intimately connected with true worship of God, which included the proper understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ. To disrupt the biblical deposit of faith was not just wrong thinking; it led to wrong living and was therefore a true jeopardy of one's salvation. Therefore, patristic theology was centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ arising out of the Old and New Testament witness as interpreted and transmitted by the original apostles.

The Person and Work of Christ

In a late first-century sermon attributed to Clement of Rome (c. 35–99), the writer states: “It is fitting that you should think of Jesus Christ as of God—as the Judge of the living and dead” (2 *Clem* 1). This notion, similar to the New Testament apostolic witness, guided patristic theological reasoning. Patristic thinkers were primarily concerned with understanding and applying the person and work of Jesus Christ in all facets of life. God had revealed himself in a person, and such a notion was radical when compared to philosophical systems of the day. The Platonists asserted that God is immaterial and only apprehended through the mind. For Christians to assert that God had lowered himself to take on flesh was preposterous. Yet, Christian theological reflection grounded their ideas in the “Word made flesh” (John 1:14) and its multifaceted implications. In responding to Celsus, a second-century critic of Christianity, Origen of Alexandria (c. 184–c. 253) states: “Consider whether the Holy Scripture shows more compassion for humankind when it presents the divine Word (*logos*), who was in the beginning with God ... as becoming flesh in order to reach everyone” (*Against Celsus* 7.42). No reflection of God was complete apart from reflection on the resurrected Christ. The economy of God, or order of divine revelation, took shape in the declaration of the risen Christ as “My Lord and my God,” as declared by Thomas in the gospel of John (John 20:28). All subsequent reflection of God by church fathers was built upon this foundation. Writers such as Tertullian, Origen, and Hilary of Poitiers expressed the necessity of thinking about this economy in various ways. For Tertullian, there was an attempt to demonstrate the interpersonal nature of God based on human psychology. Origen remarked at the importance of Christ’s various titles such as “Word” or “Wisdom” as confirmation of the divine economy. Hilary, likewise, saw the economy of God, hence the intrapersonal nature of the Godhead made explicit in the resurrection.

The person and work of Christ was the main battle ground for theological debate throughout the first centuries of the faith, especially in the fourth century. In the early fourth century, a presbyter from Egypt named Arius began teaching that Jesus was not the eternal son of God but was rather a created being. A controversy ensued which led to the first ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325, convened by Emperor Constantine (r. 324–337). The council condemned Arius’ teaching and they provided a written creed, asserting the Son’s full divinity and eternal unity with the Father. In responding to Arius and his followers, Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296–373) asserted, “Now he is Son from the Father; therefore, he will not become other than is proper to the Father’s essence” (*Against the Arians* 1.6.22). Debates continued through the fourth and early fifth centuries, requiring the further meetings of the Council of Constantinople (381), Council of Ephesus (431), and the Council of Chalcedon (454). Clarifying the person and work of Christ, these councils also explicated the biblical teaching of the Trinity by affirming the full divinity of the Spirit and the unity of the Godhead.

Thus, the person and work of Christ also provided the proper grounding for Trinitarian theological reflection. Christological heresies not only disrupted the proper understanding of Jesus but of the entire Godhead. Those espousing Pneumatological heresies, which also arose during the first centuries of the church, denied the full divinity and personhood of the Spirit. These erroneous doctrinal teachings on the Holy Spirit resonated on the same chord as many of their Christological counterparts. Thus, patristic thinkers vigorously maintained the oneness of the Triune God just as they enforced the unique role and personhood of each member of the Godhead. The Nicene creed asserts the Son is “Light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in essence with the Father.” The Chalcedonian creed clarified his two natures: “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union.” The Fathers believed that to get the person and work of Christ wrong was to get salvation wrong. Perfect understanding was not required to be saved, but one must recognize that for salvation to be effective, Jesus Christ must be fully human and fully divine. Additionally, the theme of participation in the divine nature, understood from [2 Peter 1:4](#), undergirded the importance of maintaining Christ’s two natures. Athanasius declared: “He was made human so that he might make us gods” (*On the Incarnation* 54.3). This of course did not mean that we could be of the same essence as the eternal triune God, but that Christ’s adding humanity to his divinity guaranteed that we would have a likeness to him in our glorified state (cf. [1 Jn. 3:2](#)). Thus, the Fathers of the early church anchored their understanding of the person and work of Jesus in the Scriptures and a proper interpretation of the Scriptures.

The Scriptures

Christ is the Word which means that not only is he the final revelation of God and His redemptive plan, but that he is the central focus of Scripture. He fulfilled the Scripture, and patristic reflection on Scripture began with Christ. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) declared, “Seek not to understand so that you may believe, but believe so that you may understand” (*Tractates on Gospel of John* 29.6, 2). This truth informed the way in which the fathers read and interpreted Scripture, particularly the Old Testament. The theological world of the Fathers was pervaded by Scriptural reflection, not philosophical speculation. Justin Martyr recalls a typical worship service: “And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things” (*First Apology*, 67). For early Christians, the Bible was seen as the finest mirror for one’s soul in search for transcendency. It was also the place in which Christ was known. Through the practice of prosopographical exegesis (seeing a particular author of Scripture as speaking the words of a certain member of the Godhead), Christ the Word was seen throughout. The early church saw precedence for this in the prophets, the apostles, and the writer of Hebrews. There was also an understanding of both the literal (or plain) sense of Scripture as well as the spiritual sense of Scripture. Only one who lives and walks in the Spirit can understand the deep truths that the Spirit has implanted within Scripture. Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–390) asserted, “We receive the Son’s light from the Father’s light in the light of the Spirit” (*Oration* 31.3). In this way, Patristic authors related this notion to God’s beauty. Origen of Alexandria (c. 184–c. 253) remarked, “[The] soul is moved by heavenly love and longing when it beholds the beauty and the comeliness of the Word of God” (*Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Prologue 2:17). It was the Spirit who moved in the reader of Scripture to see further depths of God’s beauty. Thus, the early church saw the indescribable beauty of God contained in his revelation.

The Scriptures also contained the divinely inspired message of salvation. Athanasius declared, “The Scriptures were spoken and written by God through men who spoke of God” (*On the Incarnation of the Word*, 56.2). Similarly, Augustine affirmed, “Your Scriptures are my pure delights.... Your voice is my delight, your voice above the profusion of pleasures” (*Confessions* 11.3–4). In Scripture, the early church saw the plan of salvation unfold and blossom in Christ, who is the remedy for the cancer of sin and despair. Christ is the fulfillment of Scripture and the one in who all the mysteries of the Bible are unlocked. “The mystery of the incarnation of the Word,” according to Maximus the Confessor, “bears the power of all the hidden meanings and figures of Scripture” (*Chapters on Knowledge*, 1:66). Scripture was a revealed story about cosmological realities rather than a dictionary or encyclopedia of facts. It was a contrary story to those propagated by other religions and philosophies. Basil of Caesarea (c. 330–379) once preached nine sermons on Genesis 1, contrasting the beauty of God in creation with the faulty theories present in Greek philosophies. In his homilies on the six days of creation, entitled *In Hexameron* (“on the six days”), Basil asserted how God accommodated himself to our communicative needs in order to reveal himself to us. This grace represents a primary facet of patristic theology: the knowledge of God begins with God. The *regula fidei*, or “rule of faith,” helped to guide and protect properly Christian interpretation of Scripture against alternate reading (particularly against Gnostic interpretations in the first through centuries). The Rule is the *skopos*, or summary, of biblical truth and represents the apostolic declaration of faith present within the New Testament. It consisted of an affirmation of Christ’s incarnation via a virgin birth, death, resurrection, bodily ascension, and bodily return all woven within a basic Trinitarian affirmation.

Patristic Theology as Worship and Transformation

Knowing God leads to worshipping God. It also impacts the way one lives. Theology in the early church was an exercise in worship and love for God. Theology was a worshipful act, not a dry academic affair. Patristic thinkers recognized that true Christian intellectualism must always be connected to worshipping and glorifying the triune God. Seeing and recognizing divine love, according to Augustine, “sets us on fire” and “lifts us up” to God (*Confessions* 13.9.10). Gregory Nyssa asserted, “The aim of the life of virtue is to become like God” (*Commentary on the Canticles*, Sermon 9). God was the proper object of growth in virtue. To see the light of God was to share in its light and be transformed by it. The worship of idols was not only unbiblical; it was indicative of demonic powers at work in the world. Those who worship false gods become like them, leading to death and despair. Worship of the true God, however, leads to light and true life.

Thus, the theology of the church and the worship of the church were intimately related. Theological reflection arose out of liturgical practice and vice versa. Most thinkers in the early church were pastors intimately connected to the life and liturgy of the church. The act of thinking about the faith was informed by the liturgy of the faith. To miss this context is to misunderstand their thinking. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35–110) reflected on the two natures of Christ, “being both the Son of man and the Son of God,” in order to encourage the church at Ephesus to be unified with church leadership for the purpose of participating without division in the Eucharist (Lord’s Supper) “which is the medicine of immortality.” (*Letter to the Ephesians* 20.2). Only those who confess that Jesus is both God and Man can understand the transformative effects of his life, death, and resurrection. It is a fool’s errand to pray to Christ or participate in the Lord’s Supper if you don’t believe that he is God who took on flesh for our salvation. The life of virtue was only possible for those united to Christ and participating in the life of the Christ’s body, the Church.

Considerations for Evangelical Christians

Evangelical readers can learn three important lessons from patristic theology. First, theological reflection should be an act of worship. Though the Fathers fought many theological battles, the aim was to maintain and promote proper worship of the Triune God and the incarnate Word. Any theological reflection that does not lead to deeper worship is not accomplishing its greatest task. Second, the Scriptures are the never-empty chest of treasures of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ set up the interpretative scheme on the road to Emmaus by which his disciples should read God's Word (see [Luke 24:13–35](#)). Every word of revelation reverberates with the name of Jesus. Last, patristic theology was concerned with transformation. Only those endowed with the Spirit of God could understand and grow in the things of God. The beauty of God, seen in Scripture and the redemptive plan of God in Christ, guided a life of virtue centered on the person of Jesus Christ as sustained by the Holy Spirit. The link between theology and God-ward transformation was inseparable.

Conclusion

Leo the Great (c. 400–461), the bishop of Rome in the fifth century, remarked that Christianity is a “religion founded on the mystery of the cross of Christ” (*Sermon* 82.6). The person and work of Jesus Christ grounded all theological reflection in the early Church. This was a received deposit of faith, contained within the sacred writings of the Old and New Testament and interpreted properly by the apostolic declaration. Of utmost importance within the in sermons, letters, treatises, and creeds was the Word made flesh as revealed in Scripture. Theology was no dry activity but a vibrant and transformative pursuit which led to true worship of the triune God.

FURTHER READING

- Christopher A. Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (IVP Academic, 2002)
- Michael A.G. Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers: Who They Were and How They Shaped the Church* (Crossway, 2011)
- N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (HarperCollins, 1978)
- Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (University of Chicago Press, 1975)
- Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (Yale University Press, 2005)

This essay is part of the Concise Theology series. All views expressed in this essay are those of the author. This essay is freely available under Creative Commons License with Attribution-ShareAlike, allowing users to share it in other mediums/formats and adapt/translate the content as long as an attribution link, indication of changes, and the same Creative Commons License applies to that material. If you are interested in translating our content or are interested in joining our community of translators, [please reach out to us](#).

This work is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)