

The Influence of the African Fathers on the Early Church

The African church fathers – early African biblical interpreters, theologians, pastors, and bishops – had a profound effect on every phase of the expanding church’s theology, biblical interpretation, and cultural interaction. Yet these influential African church leaders – with names such as Augustine, Clement, Athanasius, Origen, Cyprian, and Tertullian – are often thought of as European rather than African. In this seminar we will explore these church fathers’ contribution as African leaders and thinkers to the broader church across the centuries.

Chris Hall is chancellor of Eastern University and dean of Palmer Theological Seminary. Chris is the associate editor of the 29 volume *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (IVP) and author and editor of 13 books, including *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (IVP), *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (IVP), and *Worshiping with the Church Fathers* (IVP). Chris serves on the editorial council of *Christianity Today*. He is married to Debbie, and they have three children. The Hall family lives in Malvern, PA., where they attend The Church of the Good Samaritan (Episcopal). Debbie has taught for 19 years at Good Sam’s Episcopal day school and Chris teaches a weekly adult Sunday school class and occasionally preaches.

What is a church father? Why should we listen to such ancient voices?

1. Ancient voices help us to understand and interpret the New Testament.
2. Ancient voices provide us with key examples of how other members of our “church” family understood the Christian faith and how it was to be concretely lived out.
3. Ancient voices help us to see how others solved – or failed to solve – similar problems to those we face in the twenty-first century.
4. Ancient voices provide valuable and lasting theological models. Think, for instance, of the model of the Trinity.

The great misconception: Africa’s Christian history is recent rather than ancient.

What do we mean by early African Christianity?

Seven ways the African church fathers helped shape the Christian mind:

1. The western idea of the university was first conceived in Alexandria, Egypt.
2. Christian biblical interpretation first matured in Africa.
3. African biblical interpreters powerfully formed and shaped key Christian doctrines such as the nature of the incarnation and the beauty and wonder of the Trinity.
4. Africa was the geographical and cultural region that first set the pattern and method for seeking consent on contested points of Scripture.
5. The African desert gave birth to worldwide monasticism.
6. Ancient African theologians expertly combined theology with key philosophical perspectives that can still help us today.
7. The church's rhetorical and logical skills were honed in Africa for the benefit of Europe. Key ideas flowed from Africa into Europe (and beyond!)

Recommended Resources:

- Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (IVP, 1998)
Christopher A. Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (IVP, 2002)
Christopher A. Hall, *Worshiping with the Church Fathers* (IVP, 2009)
Thomas C. Oden, gen. ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, 29 volumes* (IVP)
Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* (IVP, 2007)
Thomas C. Oden, *The African Memory of Mark* (IVP, 2011)
Thomas C. Oden, *Early Libyan Christianity: Uncovering a North African Tradition* (IVP, 2011)
Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Eerdmans, 2002)
Lamen Sanneh, *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West, and the World* (Oxford University Press, 2005)
Lamen Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Orbis, 1983)

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