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Curtis McClane

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Bound to God with Humble-Mindedness: Toward a Spirituality of the Apostolic Fathers

CURTIS McCLANE

“In this hope then (i.e. resurrection, CDM) let our souls be bound to him.”

I Clement XXVII.1

The image of being “bound” hardly commends itself as a dominant metaphor for spirituality. On the contrary, what seems to be in vogue today is the idea that true spirituality sets us completely free from any restraints, either in our thinking or ethical practices. But in the early centuries of the church, such was not the case. In fact, this posture of one’s being bound to God seemed to be employed rather frequently. It was probably understood in an allegorical sense when the example of Polycarp was reiterated among early Christians, either in sermons or conversation.

In the *Apostolic Fathers*¹ we learn of Polycarp’s martyrdom. Because of the Roman leaders’ sensitivity to civility, neither nails nor beast were used to punish Polycarp for his stubborn attitude. Instead, they “bound him” to a pole and lit a fire around him in the middle of the arena. As tradition has it, his body was not consumed by the fire, and when an executioner stabbed him with a dagger a dove flew out. He lost so much blood instantly that it extinguished the flames and the pagan crowd marveled.

Much seems to be made of the freedom that comes from being bound. Polycarp’s own supposed testimony before the Roman pronconsuls is that he sees himself as a sacrificial offering. This stance of martyrdom became in the next two centuries a goal to be achieved for a higher experience of spiritual rewards. But because of Polycarp’s unwavering commitment and his words of hope in the face of death, he provided a model of spirituality that remained hopeful in times of crisis. This is because he hung everything on the resurrection.

“In this hope then (i.e., *resurrection*) let our souls be bound to him who is faithful in his promises and righteous in his judgments” (1 Clem. XXVII. 1). The binding of the soul to the being and purposes of God provided substance and stability even in the darkest of times.

There has been an overall neglect of the apostolic fathers in the literature of spiritual formation and spirituality. Dr. Charles Ashanin, of Christian Theological Seminary, first awakened within me a spark of interest in the Greek and Latin fathers. Out of his own story of a crisis of faith, leaving Czechoslovakia at the onset of Hitler’s blitzkrieg and occupation, he brought to bear in the classroom an urgency of interacting with the fathers in their own time of conflict. Out of Dr. Ashanin’s seminars on the early fathers, I learned the place that cultural tension plays in the formulation and crystallization of one’s faith. Tertullian, Ignatius and Polycarp became our traveling companions. Their clash with pagan culture and the intense desire to remain true to the apostolic faith provided a paradigm for our own crisis of faith.

Being introduced to this Christian literature lit a passion within me I did not know existed. Within the first generation following the writing of the Apocalypse, documents existed chronicling the earliest struggles of the Christian community. Reading those texts in their Greek and Latin compositions opened up new vistas of faith expressions and spiritual dimensions for me. Particularly, I became enamored with that body of lit-

erature called the apostolic fathers. The draw was because of what I found in these documents—evidence of an intense holiness² that bound together power and freedom.³

The typical appeal of the apostolic fathers has been for church historians, liturgists, and ecclesiologists to search for orthodoxy of belief and practice. Specifically two directions have been pursued here: the first having to do with some sort of recovery of a pristine Christianity that was believed to be monolithic in practice, or the opposite direction in trying to demonstrate such diversity in early Christianity that it throws a dark cloud over any attempt to demonstrate a common ground among the early Christian communities. But after reading and immersing myself in the letters, visions, exhortations, warnings, and directives of these early Christian leaders, I became increasingly aware of the depth, breadth, height, and width of their spirituality.

It has been my belief that a hermeneutical apologetic could and should be hammered out and forged for a modern approach to this material. To my consternation (after much exhausting research and my growing concern), little surfaced as to any interest or even recognition of this possibility. Recently, however, this negligence has been noted with an attempt to provide a solid basis for further exploration. Frances Young has proposed that there needs to be, and indeed the time is right for, a move from the attitude and posture of suspicion with regard to how one approaches primary patristic sources.⁴ Young's recognition of critical scholarship's contribution of understanding these ancient texts sets the stage for her proposal. This proposal takes a significant step beyond the "hermeneutic of suspicion," which deals with questions about texts, authorship, provenance, etc., and moves toward actually appropriating these texts for spiritual enlightenment.

In taking her proposal seriously, I have engaged the apostolic fathers in the exercise of *lectio divina* and journaling in response to their concerns. Approaching these texts with respect, with a spirit of inquiry, and with a view toward addressing interior spirituality has been rewarding indeed. What I propose to do in this article is to show that our being bound to God (understanding something of his nature and immersing ourselves in his presence) provides the perfect backdrop for "humble-mindedness," which is seen to be the antidote for "double-mindedness." So many more aspects and perspectives of the spirituality of the fathers could be addressed, but at least this meager attempt will hopefully open the doors for others to use this material in their own spiritual journey.

Probably one of the clearest statements of spirituality in this body of literature occurs in 1 Clem. XXIX.1. Here the author opens this section with an exhortation, "Let us then approach him in holiness of soul, raising pure and undefiled hands to him, loving our gracious and merciful Father, who has made us the portion of his choice for himself." This holiness of soul is the condition he desires for his readers because of temptations of all sorts, and the ever-present problem of pride. In order for the soul to be holy, it must be bound to God. It is this union with God that provides the strength to overcome sins of the flesh and desires of the heart.

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S NATURE

The images, phrases and titles used for God by the apostolic fathers gives a window to steal a look into their own understanding of spirituality. I learned in my own spiritual journey to pay attention to the words I use to address God—to whom I owe my soul's very existence. In the fathers it seems that two metaphors appear to dominate the way God is viewed.

God as Father

The first image is that of God being Father. More than 50 times in the patristic literature, God is referred to in this way. The richness of this metaphor is mined for its exquisite deposits of theological gems that plumb the depths of spirituality. On one occasion, God is referred to as "the all-merciful and beneficent Father."⁵ From this "Father" comes compassion that is extended to all who fear him, and he "kindly and lovingly" bestows his favors on everyone who draws near to him with a simple mind. Even though the word

“Abba” is never used in this body of material, this description of God reflects such an awareness of God’s nature and nurture. It is precisely at this point that one day during my own time of *meditatio* and *lectio divina* the following “Father-prayer” emerged from my own contemplative silence.

Abba: The Extraordinary Father

Gal 4:6

*“Because you are sons and daughters,
God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit
Who calls out, Abba, Father.”*

*Abba ... my first words to You
I need you but do not know how to tell You
The “Ah” and “Ba” are elemental, fundamental, sacramental
They speak volumes of untold desires
Heart’s wishes so deep, so unutterable
Fleeting glimpses of divine nurture
As an epiphany breaks into my sophisticated world
Nurture that responds to my unsophisticated murmurs
Abba ... spoken so hesitatingly
Can I really call you Daddy?
My daddy is gone
Can you be my Daddy?
My Abba-hunger and Abba-search goes on
Feeling, groping, probing
My inner agony of soul clings to you
Hoping and praying for your strong hand
to clasp mine in the darkness
Darkness cannot hide my dear Abba
It is in the darkness that You, Abba, feel so near
Take my trembling hand, shivering body, quivering lip
Soothe all the tumults in my world with your voice of reassurance
I know all is well
Because you are my Abba!*

How one approaches this Father is critical to one’s spiritual life. “A knowledge of God cannot be taught or learned apart from living out a life that is a reflection of who God is.”⁶ The simple mind (humble mind) is contrasted with the double-minded who have lost their fervor due to the passage of time, along with the persecution that tended to produce causalities in the churches with many who would waver in their faith and finally give up.

On another occasion, God is referred to as the “Father of the ages.” It is against this image that promises of reward and gifts are given to those who wait for God. This serves as an exhortative metaphor for the readers to remain true in their holiness living a “life in immortality” because of the understanding that the disciple has of the blessed and wonderful gifts of God.⁷ Additionally, this function as a Father finds its ultimate fulfillment in the expression of his love being revealed through the Son. It is through the Son alone that the Father makes perfect and adequate provision for his people.⁸ Telling indeed is the phraseology that Polycarp uses as he utters his last prayer before being consumed by flames. He raises his eyes to heaven and says, “O Lord God Almighty, Father of thy beloved and blessed Child, Jesus Christ...”⁹ He can rely on God at this moment of extreme crisis and ultimate sacrifice because this “Father” out of love blessed his only child, Jesus. Like Jesus, Polycarp too desires this gift of love and is willing to follow the steps of Jesus to the point of ultimate decision. It may be hard for us to envision suffering as holy, but God’s presence, blessings, and

intention radically transform what seems to be a tragedy in human eyes. Because of Polycarp, generations of Christians afterward were given hope in times of despair.

God as Creator

The second image that emerges is God as creator. He is referred to as the all-wise creator who is the master of the universe.¹⁰ As one would expect, such references encompass an awareness that this world is made by a creator who has also supplied for his people all they need to live a godly life in an ungodly world. But this image is not limited to portraying a God who is cold and distant from humanity with no redeeming qualities that would ever suggest a personal relationship with his creation. On the contrary, this maker is known to possess qualities of “compassion” and “sweetness.”¹¹

For the apostolic fathers, this world could only be explained in terms of being created by an all-powerful creator. He is the one who has made the “unsearchable places” such as the “lower world” and the “boundless sea.” Though the human mind cannot fathom these mysteries, the child of God rests in the fact that such mysteries demonstrate the design and plan of God. In fact, “concord and peace” are the result of the seasons coming and going as they should, as well as describing the interaction of the smallest of animals. Water itself is referred to as the “everlasting springs” that provide everything human beings need to enjoy life, have good health, and be sustained daily.¹² God as creator ties together the loose threads of the unexplainable. I noticed after making this discovery in the fathers that my own journal entries contained many references to God as creator. Sometimes God’s creative genius provided the very stuff of the meditation for the day: snow blanketing the valley below; bees coming in and out their bee hive; leaves and blossoms floating down the swollen creek; hawks catching the updrafts off the side of Chandler mountain; the early morning sun reflecting off the lake through the orange fog; etc. All of this for the last several years has given me a reservoir of experiences to draw from God’s vast creation to engender awe, reverence, and child-like wonder in a world beyond my grasp.

These two metaphors indicate that the early church fathers understood spirituality as fundamentally a relationship with God who is personal, personable, and person-directed. His ultimate power in creation demonstrates his love and compassion, and he behaves kindly and sweetly toward his disciples. This appreciation for the very essence of God has helped me understand both the imminence and immanence of God. He is transcendent while at the same time present. This dual gift of God’s very self is appropriated in the life of holiness and serves as a daily impetus to commune with him.

HUMBLE-MINDEDNESS OR DOUBLE-MINDEDNESS?

A significant key to understanding the fundamental nature of spiritual formation in the Apostolic Fathers lies in the concept of humble-mindedness. In fact, it is a major motif in 1 Clement. “Let us, therefore, be humble-minded, brothers, putting aside all arrogance and conceit and foolishness and wrath . . .”¹³ This hortatory injunction follows on the heels of examples of faith and hospitality displayed in the lives of Abraham, Lot, and Rahab. These Old Testament figures were appealed to by way of warning and emulation for faithfulness.

In this immediate context, Lot’s wife is held up and described as one who was “double-minded” and had doubts concerning the power of God, incur[ring] judgment and becom[ing] a warning to all generations.¹⁴ Double-minded could be translated literally as double-souled. This word is used only twice in the New Testament, James 1:8 and 4:8. To be double-minded is a way of describing a “soul divided between faith and the world.”¹⁵ It is somewhat amazing that a word used only twice in the New Testament is used more than 60 times in the apostolic fathers. This would suggest that a major concern of the early church leaders of the second century had to do a lot with the wavering of faith and the defection of believers. It was a spiritual issue, and it is no mistake that the fathers of the church chose this word to describe the perilous condition one would be found in if doubt and despair gripped the heart.

One of the most significant texts regarding the danger of double-mindedness is found in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Mandate 9. In this Mandate alone, it is mentioned 14 times. The clear distinction is made between faith that has power and the double-minded person who has no power. The latter person fails in all that is attempted because double-mindedness is a daughter of the devil, while faith is a child of God. Faith comes from God and is from above; double-mindedness is from below, an earthly spirit and comes from the devil, having no power of its own.¹⁶ In conjunction with double-mindedness, James employs the word “unstable.” The apostolic fathers use it in a sense of disorder and unruliness. Polybius used it of both political disturbance and individual character. It fundamentally described a person vacillating in all his activity and conduct.¹⁷ So, what do we have? Being bound to God sprang from an awareness of who he is and then proceeded to a humble mind who trusted in his power. It can be affirmed universally that all of the writers of the early church fathers until the 7th century believed in the creative, forgiving, healing, and sustaining power of God. This recognition forced me to re-read my own journal entries and discover those places where I had stumbled onto demonstrations of God’s power. And believe it or not, it was during my moments of being humbled when I saw the greatest demonstrations of God’s power in my life.

Ego, pride, self, and narcissistic enterprises were brought to light in the unfolding of God’s wisdom and power in those innocent and benign journal entries. The list is so long: being asked to leave a church, finding out my limitations as a husband and father, seeing the depth of sin in my own heart, realizing my own faults, hearing great orators of the word and feeling like a failure. These and more could be recounted. The list goes on.

We have seen that being bound to God was seen as a faith commitment that may ultimately lead the believer to the purging and purifying flames. It is under this sort of pressure and moment of crisis that the resurrection sustains one to rely on the personal relationship with God that rests in his power.

One day in my devotional time, I read the following passage from Thomas a Kempis:

Look at the shining examples of our ancient Fathers and the Saints, in whom true perfection and religion flourished and then you will see how little we do by comparison. How can we even compare our life with theirs!”¹⁸

My heart and spiritual journey has echoed his sentiments. Becoming familiar with a few of the lives of the saints has made me realize the meager level of my own Christian commitment. I have come to appreciate how my Christian faith rests on the vast heritage of men and women who literally gave their lives so that Christ could go on living in the world. Their martyrdom served as a silent witness to the greatest news the world had ever heard.

Faith of our fathers—hopefully this brief essay has introduced you to their faith. In that old hymn, we sing “living still.” The faith of the apostolic fathers can indeed still live within us and serve as model for our own spirituality.

CURTIS MCCLANE

Dr. McClane is minister of Highland View Church of Christ in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. He is the guest editor of this issue of *Leaven*.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The term “apostolic fathers” refers to the writings from the early church leaders who were usually known as “bishops.” They wrote during the second century, and authority was accorded their writings because they were seen as the generation of leaders who immediately succeeded the apostles. Their literature makes up the first body of material that followed the canon of scripture. *The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two Thousand Years from East to West*, ed. Gordon Mursel (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 34.
- 2 Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1985), 4.

- 3 Eberhard Arnold, *The Early Christians in Their Own Words* (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 1997), 43.
- 4 Frances Young, "From Suspicion and Sociology to Spirituality: on Method, Hermeneutics and Appropriation with Respect to Patristic Material," *Studia Patristica Volume XXIX*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingston (Leuven, Belgium: Peters, 1997), vide pages 420ff. Following her work, a festschrift in honor of Robert Louis Wilken was published containing significant essays on patristic exegesis. Charles Kannengiesser shows that this literature does indeed have a future in the post-modern world because patristic interpreters of scripture saw holy writ as containing language that could frame their own spiritual journey. See Charles Kannengiesser, "A Key for the Future of Patristics," in *In Dominico Eloquio: In Lordly Eloquence*, ed. Paul M. Blowers, et. al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 90-106.
- 5 I Clem. XXIII. 1.
- 6 Roberta C. Bondi, *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), 101.
- 7 I Clem. XXXV. 3.
- 8 Ep. Barn. XII. 8.
- 9 Mar. XIV. 1.
- 10 I Clem. VIII. 2; XX.11.
- 11 I Clem. XIV. 3.
- 12 I Clem. XX. 5-12.
- 13 I Clem. XIII. 1.
- 14 I Clem. XI. 2.
- 15 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 119-122
- 16 Sheperd, Man. 9. 1-11.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2000), 46.

