

Introduction



Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it our ancestors obtained God's approval. Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were made of things which are not seen. By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained approval that he was righteous, God testified of his gifts: and by his faith he, although he is dead, still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken so that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had taken him: for before his disappearance he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But without faith it is impossible to please God: for one that comes into the divine presence must believe both that God exists and that God rewards the diligent seeker. By faith Noah, being warned by God of things not yet seen, moved with reverence, prepared an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness that comes through faith. By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into the place that he should receive as an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he sojourned in the promised land, as in a strange country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked forward to a city which has foundations, whose builder and architect is God. Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive, and delivered a child when she was past age, because she judged God – who had made a promise with her – to be faithful. Therefore from this one son – and one as good as dead – sprang descendents as many as the stars of the sky, and as innumerable as the sand by the seashore. These people all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them from afar, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had set their minds on that country out of which they came, they might have had an opportunity to return. But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Thus, God is not

ashamed to be called their God: having prepared for them a city. By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, through Isaac shall your ancestors come. Reckoning that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; and indeed he did figuratively receive him back. By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave them a commandment concerning his bones. By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden by his parents for three months, because they saw that he was a proper child; and they were not afraid of the king's commandment. By faith Moses, when he had come of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. He esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he was looking toward the future reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as he saw the invisible God. Through faith he kept the Passover, and the sprinkling of blood, lest he that destroyed the firstborn should touch them. By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land: which the Egyptians attempted to do and were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they were circled for seven days. By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with the unbelievers, when she had received the spies with peace. And what shall I more say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephtha; of David also, and of Samuel and the prophets: Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness they were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned the armies of pagans to flight. Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trials of cruel mockings and scourgings, and yes, also of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented. Of whom the world was not worthy, they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, did not receive the promise. God has provided a better thing for us, that without us, they should not be made perfect.

Therefore, seeing that we also are surrounded with such a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such opposition from sinners, lest you become weary and faint in your minds. You have not yet resisted unto blood, in your struggle against sin.

– Hebrews 11:1-12:4

Several years ago, as we were studying this passage in our church, a powerful thought struck me: the author is using these stories of Israel's faithfulness to inspire and energize the Christian community. The recipients of this letter, under what was probably a double dose of persecution (from both Jews and Gentiles), were in danger of forgetting their past, of rejecting the stories on which they had been raised. The writer describes in great detail how their forefathers had likewise been pitted against many challenges to their faith and how they, by the grace of God, had overcome these obstacles. In refreshing the memory of his readers, the author was challenging them to endure and to be faithful to the examples that their ancestors had set for them. Stories, like those told by the writer of Hebrews, play an essential role in our process of understanding the world and in guiding our actions in that world. Indeed, cultures tend to be defined by the stories they tell. A cultural narrative – the stories of a particular culture taken as a whole – not only provides a common means of understanding the world, but also serves to provide a cultural identity. Allister McGrath illustrates this point with the tale of a Native American lad of the Kiowa tribe, whose father left him for a day with one of the tribe's older squaws. The young boy spent the day listening to the squaw's re-telling of the tribe's history: about the glory days of hunting buffalo, about the oppression they suffered at the hands of the white soldiers, and many other memories. At the end of the day, when his father came to retrieve him, the lad's identity had been established. He was no longer only nominally a Kiowa, but now he was in the truest sense a Kiowa. The squaw, by spinning the narrative of the Kiowa people, had endowed the boy with the tools he would need to make sense of himself and the world around him¹.

No cultural narrative is monotone in voice, but instead each one is forged from a variety of sources and stories. For instance, an community of middle class African-Americans might equally draw

their meaning from both an ethnic narrative that perhaps had its roots in Africa and in the struggle for civil rights in America and an economic narrative characteristic of middle class Americans. The Jewish Christians to whom Hebrews was written understood that they were to be defined primarily by a single narrative, the story of God's work in the world. Thus, the persecution that these early Christians faced should be understood as a temptation to find meaning in stories other than that of Yahweh, their God – e.g., in the pagan narrative of Roman Imperialism or in a Jewish narrative that rejected the lordship of Jesus. The Hebrew Christians, on the verge of forgetting the Torah's stories of their ancestors, were in danger of trading away the basic narrative that had shaped their people for thousands of years. The author thus pleads with his audience not to forget these stories of Israel's faithfulness because these are the stories that have defined their cultural identity and have prepared them for the struggles of the present. After weaving his way through the history of Israel, the writer launches into chapter twelve: "These stories of such bold faithfulness have prepared you for the struggles of the present. Therefore, do not lose sight of them, but rather be energized by them, set aside those things that would hinder you and obediently live out the bold faithfulness to which you were called" (paraphrased).

This verse is as challenging for the Church today as it was for the epistle's original audience because we find ourselves in a position not unlike that of the Hebrews Christians; under pressure from the forces of our culture, we are in danger of forgetting the stories that have provided our identity. Unfortunately, the Scriptural narrative of God's work in history is no longer our primary tool for understanding the world; we increasingly find ourselves looking to other narratives (e.g., materialism, nationalism, individualism) in addition to the Scriptural one. Materialism is a way of life centered around the accumulation of wealth and possessions, and the hazardous synthesis of materialism and the Scriptural narrative is often referred to as the "health and wealth gospel." Nationalism is probably best described in the words of the Baptist World Alliance's Berlin declaration: "Nationalism or adherence to a national ideology which exalt one nation over others... are forms of idolatry and not compatible with Christian beliefs"². Individualism is a worldview that is driven by the needs and wants of individuals; it is a "me first" philosophy that exploits the selfishness of our human nature³. Each of these three worldly narratives sets its focus on something other than God – wealth,

national identity or the individual – and ultimately cannot be harmonized with the Scriptural narrative whose focus is God.

In the United States, churches are tempted by a deceptive American mythology, which is acutely hazardous because it incorporates elements of the Scriptural narrative but subordinates these biblical stories to other narratives – particularly the three that we have named above: materialism, nationalism and individualism. Although America has always been a religious nation, its mission is very different from that of Jesus and the Church. The narrative of the American culture has been shaped by the foundational principle of an individual's right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." In contrast, the Church is shaped by the self-denial taught and modeled by Jesus. The American story prescribes for us a self-centered universe, where freedom is defined as an individual's right to choose and pursue her destiny. On the other hand, the Scriptural story prescribes a God-centered universe in which freedom means setting aside all idols – including the self – and living in obedience to the way of Jesus. Many churches in the United States today dangerously toy with this American mythology. For instance, when we support the wars of the nation or when we look first to the political machine as a solution to the world's ills, we forget that true power lies, not in the sword, nor in money, nor in worldly authority, but in the hands of God alone. The Church in the United States today is in a precarious situation: as a result of the subtle deception of the American mythology, we increasingly find ourselves lacking a common narrative for truthfully understanding the world.

One feature of a cultural narrative is that in providing a shared identity, it fosters unity among the members of its community. Roger Betsworth puts it this way: "[Cultural narratives] organize experience into a quite definite frame of meaning and seek to teach us to think in the same way"⁴. However, despite the New Testament's repeated calls for unity among Christ's followers, the Church in the United States today is rarely united by the Scriptural story. This disunity has its roots in our adulterous entertaining of other narratives. Instead, congregations and denominations tend to be driven by particular agendas (e.g., social justice, feminism, conservatism, gay rights) and gradually drift away from each. Thus, there is a great need today for the Church to be re-united around the primary cultural narrative laid out in the Scriptures, a story whose main character is God, revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. The Scriptural narrative also shows us that God has chosen a people to bear witness to God's work in the world. Since the

Church is God's people in the world today, we can only come to know our identity by remembering the faithful people of God who have gone before us.

There are many stories of faithfulness, like those of Hebrews 11, contained within the pages of the Bible. However, there also are many stories that testify to God's ongoing work in creation that are not included in the Scriptures. The opening lines of the second century account of the martyrs of Perpetua and Felicitas expresses this idea: "If ancient illustrations of faith, which both testify to God's grace and tend to humankind's edification, are collected in writing so that by the studying of them God may be honored and humanity may be strengthened, why should not new instances also be collected, that are equally suitable for both purposes?" All stories of God's work in history serve to remind us of who God is and of the divine plan for reconciling humanity and all of creation. Given the forgetfulness of the Church today, there is a desperate need to have our memories refreshed with stories of the faithfulness of God's people. The earliest centuries of the Church provide many such stories of faithfulness, of communities in which the Scriptures provided the primary cultural narrative for the people of God.

Thus, this book that you hold in your hands is above all a storybook, which aims to revive in our minds the memory of the earliest Christians and their beliefs and practices, stories that often go untold in churches today. Although it spins a narrative of the Early Church, this volume should not be treated as a history book; it does not aim to provide a complete picture of these communities. Although there was doubtlessly some level of unfaithfulness in the Early Church, we will follow the example of the writer of Hebrews and focus on the stories of the early Christians' faithfulness in order that we might be challenged and inspired by their example. Sadly, our churches today typically know very little about the history of God's work in the world carried out through the Church's faithfulness. Our embracing of narratives other than the Scriptural one has the effect of gradually nudging the stories of faithfulness out of our memory. Thankfully, we have not completely forgotten the Scriptural narrative, but today we approach Scripture in a very different manner than our ancestors in the faith did. Our tendency is not to approach the Scriptures as a grand drama in which we are called to participate, but rather to pick and choose passages that are relevant to us as individuals or local communities. Winn Griffin has identified two deadly temptations that are particularly threatening to our reading of Scripture. First, *versitis* is our tendency to read and quote the Scriptures in small passages, picking and

choosing ones that fit with the blended narrative we use for understanding the world. The second and related malady is *topicalitis*, which refers to our churches' tendency to approach Scripture via relevant topics instead of as a singular narrative⁵. Thus, in failing to understand Scripture as a single unified story of God's work in the world, we often are inclined to mix the pleasant parts of Scripture with some other narrative, rather than submitting ourselves to be formed by the Scriptural narrative.

There is a profound need in God's people today to set aside worldly narratives and to return the Scriptural story of God's work in the world, and to the long history of God's people. If the Church needs to re-hear its stories and re-discover its identity, what better place is there than the Early Church to begin to refresh our memory with stories of faithfulness? These were, after all, the communities that were closest to Jesus and his Apostles, that were shaped by the stories of those who followed Jesus to a martyr's death, and that took the Scriptures as a primary cultural narrative for shaping their gathered life.

The stories of this book are presented in the form of texts written during the first three centuries, which were translated from their original languages into English in the nineteenth century. These translations however are generally quite difficult to understand. Thus, working under the assumption that the stories of the Early Church should be accessible to everyone, not just to scholars, I have taken the nineteenth century translations and have paraphrased them into contemporary English in an attempt to make them accessible to a contemporary audience.

There are two primary purposes for which this book was written. While the primary purpose of this book is to allow the reader to encounter the stories of the Early Church firsthand, a secondary purpose is to name specific lessons that churches today can learn from the Early Church. The gathered life of most churches today bears little resemblance to that of the Early Christian communities. Gerhard Lohfink gives a striking assessment of this difference: "[Our church communities] no longer come together to recognize the work of God in the present and to give a theological meaning to present events"⁶. While we are not called to mindlessly mimic every facet of Early Church life, many aspects of the deep truths found in these early stories are particularly challenging to us. Not all of these lessons will be applicable for every church community, but I pray that these lessons will be listened to, thought through and prayed over, and that, if a lesson proves convicting in the end, action will be taken to embody a response.

This book is broken down into three sections, which when taken together form a broad picture of Christian discipleship. These three sections had their origin in the words of Justin Martyr: “By water, faith, and wood, those who are prepared beforehand, and who repent of the sins they have committed, shall escape the impending judgment of God” (*Dialogue* 138). For Justin, water symbolized the origins of Christian discipleship, particularly repentance and baptism. Faith represented the way in which the Christian community modeled the love of Christ, and wood reminded the Church of the cross of Christ, which symbolized complete obedience to the will of God – even to the point of death. Thus, in progressing from water, to faith, to wood, we have laid out for us a detailed map of Christian discipleship in the Early Church.

Before we enter into the process of describing that map, it would serve us well to consider how we should approach these stories of the Early Christian communities. There are two opposite, and equally erroneous, ways in which the stories of the Early Church are handled. Most churches have forgotten the stories of the early Christians altogether. As we have continually stressed, when the Early Church is ignored or forgotten, a part of the Christian identity is lost. The other erroneous approach is to idolize the early Christians, and to understand their beliefs and practices as a perfect model of Christian obedience. Communities that take this stance will exhibit the same flaws that are found in the Early Christian communities. Thus, our approach to these stories must be steered between these two extremes, recognizing the need to remember and learn from the Early Church but at the same time recognizing that these stories do not provide us with a model of Christian perfection.

Despite all the given reasons why it is important to tell and re-tell the stories of the Early Church, we must remember that they too were sinful human beings. Although they were probably set apart from their culture to a greater degree than most church communities today, there were ways in which they were conformed to their culture. For instance, they generally maintained an astonishingly low view of women. For instance, Cyprian’s statement in the *Third Book of Treatises* that “A woman ought to be silent in Church” (#46) or Tertullian’s comments about the “audacious woman” who took the initiative to teach in the Church (*On Baptism* XVII) might strike our ears as particularly harsh. Some grace must also be allowed for instructions about external appearance, which might at first sound rather legalistic – e.g., “The

beard must not be plucked” (Cyprian *Third Book of Treatises* #84). Certainly, some of the external guidelines were based on sound principles: for instance, Tertullian’s rejection of purple clothing was a rejection of the trappings of earthly nobility. Perhaps some early Christian communities did err on the side of being too legalistic, but perhaps others – as St. Benedict would later do – instituted guidelines about externals as a means to strengthen and unify their communities. Another related fault of the Early Church was its increasing domestication to the wider culture. It is typical to look to the era of Constantine as the period in which the Church became domesticated. However, the domestication of the Church began long before Constantine, as the structure of the Church began to look more and more like that of the Roman government. This gradual trend toward domestication led to a grand culmination in Constantine, where the Church’s authority was united with that of the State ⁷. Our reaction to these faults in the Early Church should not be to reject these stories altogether, but rather to be reminded that despite all the wonderful and challenging stories that these writers recorded for us, they were in the end sinful humans prone to error, just as we are.

Our course between the extremes of ignoring the Early Christians and idolizing them can best be navigated once we understand why the stories of the Early Church are important. First of all, the Early Christian communities obviously were closer to Jesus and the Apostles than any other era of Church history. The memory of Jesus’ life and the stories about his work had not yet faded in their collective memory. The lives of the Apostles, the ones called to follow Jesus most closely, extended almost all the way to the end of the first century and thus several generations of Christians were impacted by their interaction with the Apostles. The proximity of the Early Church to Jesus and the Apostles renders their stories essential in understanding what it means to be disciples of Jesus. As we refresh in our minds the faithful stories of these early Christians, we will grow deeper in our understanding of the Gospel of Jesus.

A second reason for immersing ourselves in the stories of the Early Church is the example of the many martyrs. The martyrs display for us complete self-denial and complete obedience to Jesus, even to death. Most of us are like the audience of the epistle to the Hebrews, we have not yet “resisted unto blood” (12:4) in our struggle against the powers of the world, and indeed many of us may not even feel that we are in a struggle at all. However, the Scriptural narrative often reminds us that we are to expect

persecution in some form or another. What better way could there be for us to expect and prepare for persecution than to tell the stories of those who themselves have patiently endured persecution, even persecution unto death? As Justin Martyr's words (borrowed for the title of this book) remind us, martyrdom is an essential part of the Christian identity. Our English word "martyr" comes from the Greek word that means witness. Indeed, the martyrs were witnesses of God's work in themselves; they pointed to God's power to transform ordinary people into the most courageous of heroes. The stories of their lives embody for us the Gospel story and make the call to discipleship more real.

Lastly, the stories of the Early Church are important because they are vivid reminders of *koinonia* – that sharing fellowship to which the Christian community is called. Just after Pentecost, the Church in Jerusalem was in the habit of meeting together daily (Acts 2:46), and later Ignatius similarly urges the Church in Ephesus: "Take heed, then, to come together often to give thanks to God, and show his praise" (XIII). In our age in which individualism destroys most manifestations of community, the stories of the Early Church are especially important in forming our identity as the gathered people of God. The sharing of resources was essential in shaping the Early Christian communities. For instance, Clement in his letter to the Corinthians captures the important role of sharing in the building of community: "Let the rich man provide for the wants of the poor; and let the poor man bless God, because he has been given a community that can provide his needs" (XXXVIII). This sharing in the Early Church was based in the Eucharist, whereby in sharing a meal together, Christ's followers were reminded of the depths of Christ's gift to them. Mathetes, in describing the Christian community to Diognetus, reinforces the stories of Acts 2 and 4 by specifically pointing out the importance of the "common table" in the Early Christian communities (V). The stories of the Early Church with their depiction of an intense community life are particularly significant for our churches at the dawn of the twenty-first century that generally have very little experience of community.

We have said a great deal about how the Early Church should be approached, but before we dive into these stories we should perhaps also make a few comments about our posture in approaching these stories. Most importantly, we should approach these stories with listening ears. It has always been striking to me that the root of the English word "obedience" comes from the Latin word meaning "to hear" or "to listen." Thus, obedience requires

careful listening before it requires action. Secondly, we should approach these stories in humility. In the modern era, we have a tendency to deceive ourselves into considering our times as superior to those of our ancestors. We should recognize and reject this tendency. The Early Christians were humans just as we are and there is much that we can learn from them, particularly because of their proximity to Jesus and the Apostles. Thirdly, we should be prepared to be changed by our encounter with these stories of the Early Church. Our listening and humility will do little good if we are not willing to allow the Spirit to change us through these stories of faithfulness. If we humble our hearts, open our ears and allow the Spirit to work in our lives, we will be formed by these stories, molded more closely into the likeness of Jesus.

As a people who long to follow Jesus, we cannot afford to continue to ignore these stories. The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Roman Church: “Do not be conformed to the narratives of this world, but be transformed by making your memory new again, refreshing it with the stories of faithfulness, so that your community may be able to discern and carry out its role in God’s good and perfect plan for reconciling the world” (12:2 paraphrased). As our churches increasingly blend the Scriptural narrative with worldly ones, there is a great need to have our memory refreshed with stories of the faithfulness of God’s people. As the Apostle Paul and the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews both knew well, our own faithful obedience depends to a large extent on our memory of those saints who have gone before us. If our memories fade, our obedience will wane. May these stories of the Early Church’s faithfulness inspire us all to reject the alluring narratives of the world and to carry out in all boldness our role in the divine story of God’s redemption of