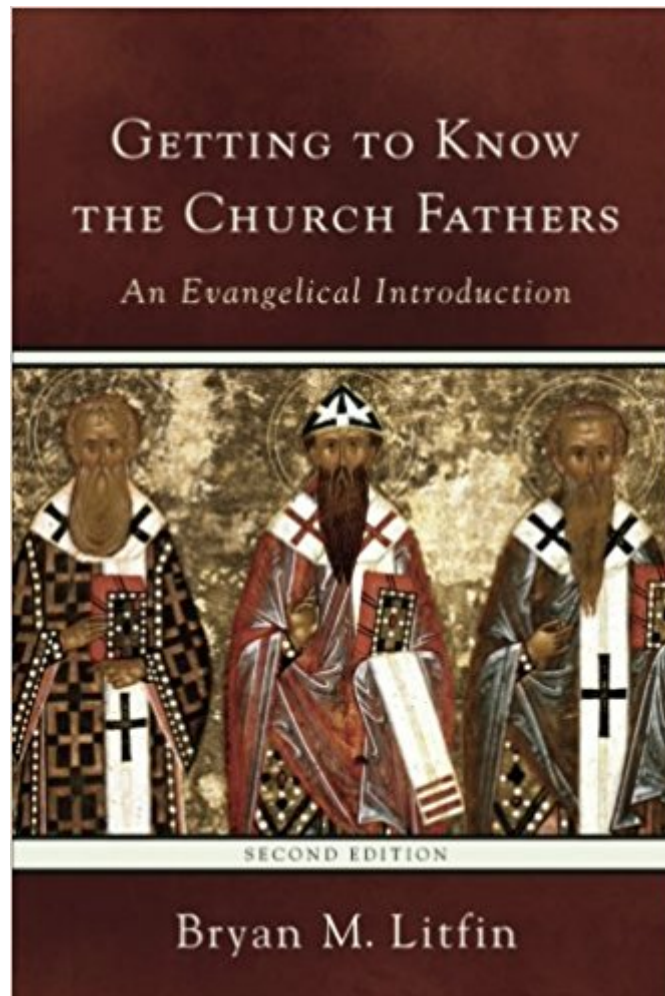




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# Getting To Know The Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction



## Synopsis

A Trusted Introduction to the Church Fathers This concise introduction to the church fathers connects evangelical students and readers to twelve key figures from the early church. Bryan Litfin engages readers with actual people, not just abstract doctrines or impersonal events, to help them understand the fathers as spiritual ancestors in the faith. The first edition has been well received and widely used. This updated and revised edition adds chapters on Ephrem of Syria and Patrick of Ireland. The book requires no previous knowledge of the patristic period and includes original, easy-to-read translations that give a brief taste of each writer's thought.

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## Customer Reviews

"For an evangelical world awakening to the importance of the early fathers of the church, this second edition of Dr. Litfin's work makes an important and continuing contribution to those seeking access to the writers and writings of that period. I am delighted to recommend this introductory work. The selection of twelve representative figures from the period of early Christianity is prudent and presented in an artful and practical manner."--John D. Hannah, Dallas Theological Seminary

"After years of neglecting the fathers, evangelicals are waking up to the importance of the patristic era and the various significant authors who inhabited it. This new edition of Bryan Litfin's book on this period of church history is an extremely lucid and reliable guide. A must read."--Michael A. G. Haykin, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

"A tremendous service is provided by Litfin's introduction of the fathers for an audience that might be uninformed or even suspicious of an era of Christianity crucial to our identity. Insightful, studied, and clear, the work

announces key figures, showing their relevance for the contemporary church. The new additions are a refreshing complement to the corpus of the early church where Christ-centered passion shaped writing and leadership from which the church eternally benefits."--Brian Shelton, Toccoa Falls College

"If you are an American evangelical who is curious about the strange world of the early church, this book is just what you need. Litfin is a comforting and reliable guide through territory that is so unfamiliar. But this book will do more than allay your suspicions. The church fathers have much to teach us about Christianity, and Litfin's honest and probing discussions will help you think through your own faith in light of the grand narrative of the early Christian past."--Donald Fairbairn, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

"Litfin introduces twelve towering figures from the church's history, from far east (Syria) to far west (Britain), inviting the reader into the thought world of the church fathers. These men (and one woman) built on the apostolic foundation through their lives and ministries, and made the church strong in times of persecution and doctrinal uncertainty. Didactic and well-researched, this volume portrays the fathers fairly, displaying both their achievements and flaws. It is perfect for evangelicals who wish to connect with those who shaped a vital and rich period in Christian history."--Stefana Dan Laing, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Bryan M. Litfin (PhD, University of Virginia) is professor of theology at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Illinois. He is the author of several books, including *Early Christian Martyr Stories*, and has written numerous scholarly articles and essays.

This writing brings a whole new perspective on what Christians are living today - right now! Certainly a must-read for any Christian but especially a church leader. This changes how I see the future of the church and certainly the body of Christ!

For many of those cracking open the pages of Bryan Litfin's book, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, this is their first real glimpse of the ancient Christian church. Rather than returning to old, familiar friends, they are embarking on an exploratory journey that will hopefully enrich and deepen their appreciation for the church fathers (p.1). As the book's subtitle indicates, it is oriented towards evangelical readers who might not know much about the Patristic era. Litfin, who is himself an evangelical professor at Moody Bible Institute, has a task made more difficult by the suspicion and skepticism towards the early church fathers held by some parts of the evangelical community. It seems that keeping his audience in mind is

important for properly understanding the purpose of Litfin's efforts. He is striving to accomplish two main goals: acquaint readers with some of the early church fathers (and a mother), and dispel harmful misconceptions held about them by some (though not all) parts of contemporary Christianity. Learning about the Fathers Rather than mainly recounting the development of Christian doctrines, Litfin focuses more on introducing his readers to the church fathers "as individual personalities" (p.5). He tells readers that, "I want to help you get to know some folks who are part of your own spiritual legacy and heritage in the faith" (p.5). What does it mean to call someone a church father? This term strikes some as odd given Jesus' words in Matthew's Gospel, "And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven" (23:9, NRSV). Jesus also speaks out against calling people "teachers" or "instructors" in the same passage, terms that are regularly used without much controversy. Therefore, Litfin thinks it wasn't the title itself that mattered to Jesus so much as the hypocritical way it was being used by some of the scribes and Pharisees (p.7). Having dealt with that objection, Litfin shifts to explaining the origins of the term "church father." In the ancient world, "The idea of one's spiritual mentor serving as a father figure was very common" (p.7). Paul even referred to himself as a father to his audience in 1 Corinthians 4:15, "Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel" (NRSV). The term was used in a similar way throughout the first few centuries of Christianity by writers like Clement of Alexandria. Litfin explains that the Church has generally used a fourfold standard for identifying someone as a "father of the church": such figures must be "ancient, orthodox in doctrine, holy in life, and approved by other Christians" (p.8). The presence of these categories can already be seen in the writings of the 5th century theologian Vincent of Lérins (p.8). Of course, there were also a number of influential women in the Patristic era (for example, Macrina the Younger, sister of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa) (p.5). Unfortunately, few works written by them have survived, and it's necessary to remember that the Patristic church could be, and lived in a society that often was, all-too-patriarchal. In sum, Litfin suggests that readers see the church fathers as "men and women whose beliefs and lifestyles were consistent with what is recorded in the apostolic teachings" [Thus the ancient fathers provide us with the first links of continuity to our Christian past] (p.8). Misconceptions about Patristic Theologians The first myth Litfin addresses is the idea that the church fathers

were not biblical (p.9). It is true that the church fathers were fallible and susceptible to error. However, that doesn't mean that they ignored Scripture or have nothing to offer us in terms of wisdom. For Litfin, this myth comes from viewing the fathers through an anachronistic Reformation era lens (p.9). Litfin believes that the Roman Catholic Church over-emphasized the significance of the great traditions of the faith during the time leading up to the Reformation, leading to a "two-source" theory of revelation with Scripture and Tradition pitted against each other (p.9). Arguments can be had about how fair of a characterization this is, but either way it is anachronistic to read it back into the early church fathers' view of Scripture and Tradition. Here is Litfin's summary of the issue: The truth of the matter is that the church fathers loved the Scriptures immensely. You cannot read the fathers without immediately noticing how the pages of their writings reverberate with scriptural quotations and themes. Scripture was in the very air they breathed; it was what nourished their souls. (p.10) Some people also think that the church fathers aren't worth studying because they were all Roman Catholics (which is understood to be bad). Litfin writes, "Once again, we commit the error of anachronism if we read our later concept of Roman Catholicism back onto the church fathers" (p.11). He explains that the term "catholic" is derived from a Greek expression that speaks of "pertaining to the whole" or being "universal." Therefore, "When it was used to describe the Christian church in the patristic period, it referred to the unified community of all true believers in the world" (p.11). Litfin dates the rise of a centralized Roman Catholic church, one that understood Rome to be the seat of Christianity in the world, to the late 5th and early 6th centuries AD, during and following the time of Leo the Great (pp.12, 246). Indeed, some of the wrangling that occurred during the Christological controversies that culminated in the Council of Chalcedon were influenced by power struggles between major Christian centers like Rome, Alexandria, and Constantinople (p.246). Hence, Litfin contends that during this time period, "Rome, though an important center of Christian life, was not the dominant head of a unified church hierarchy that always did its bidding" (p.246). The final and possibly most damaging misconception addressed by Litfin is that church fathers represent the "fall" of Christianity from its unblemished biblical roots (p.13). He explains: It seems there is a certain historiography subtly being transmitted among many evangelicals today. It goes something like this. The New Testament era was "good," and for a

century or two the church was "pure." But then the subsequent generations started perverting the apostolic truth. I know this historiography is being taught today because I have encountered it many times in my students. (p.13) Who is the guilty culprit in this construal of church history? Most often, blame falls on the Emperor Constantine, who granted toleration to Christianity in the early 4th century (pp.13-14). It is argued that Constantine caused the Church to become watered down and corrupted. In the aftermath of Constantine, most of the Church became the Body of Christ in name only. Litfin opposes this historical narrative for a number of reasons. "First of all, I find it to be an overly-simplistic way of doing history. History tends to be messy, not easily lending itself to portrayals that make absolute statements about positives and negatives." (p.14). Another obstacle for proponents of this "fall" narrative is that the Reformers themselves, according to Litfin, didn't think that the church fathers represented the early Church. "It's not that the church fathers represented the early Church, but that the Reformers themselves often used the ancient church as an exemplar, the very thing to which they were trying to return." (p.14). The final reason that he judges the "fall" historiography to be inaccurate is because it "robs contemporary believers of vast portions of their historical legacy." (p.15). He resolutely maintains that "all the centuries of Christian history are our rightful possession." (p.15). Each period of church history has both its bright spots and ugly stains, and we have to take the good along with the bad. Of course there are some areas of scriptural interpretation where most evangelical readers will disagree with the church fathers, and that's okay. Nevertheless, "when it comes to the general thrust of Christian doctrine, we must stand alongside them if we want to be considered orthodox since the church fathers have collectively blazed a theological trail for us." (pp.16-17). Litfin also points out that: "When we get to know the church fathers as individuals, we will begin to understand something of the grandeur of the community to which we belong." "what the Apostles' Creed calls the 'communion of saints.'" [This] should give us a sense that we are not alone, that we are part of something grand and magnificent, that we must fight the good fight in our own generation like those who went before us. (p.17) Having set out his reasons for valuing the church fathers, Litfin spends the rest of the book actually introducing his readers to them. He discusses twelve figures: Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian of Carthage, Perpetua of Carthage, Origen of Alexandria, Athanasius of Alexandria,

Ephrem the Syrian, John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, Cyril of Alexandria, and Patrick of Ireland (p.iii). In each chapter, Litfin begins with a brief biographical narrative, explores the theological issues/controversies that the church father was involved in, and ends by reflecting on the importance of the person for later Christian belief and practice. He also includes at the close of each chapter a list of further, usually more academic, books and translations available for those wanting to dig deeper. At certain points, the evangelical lens through which he reads the church fathers does become unhelpfully noticeable. Some of his analogies are also clunky. For example, I was distracted by his comparison of Tertullian with a cowboy from the wild west, firing “white-hot pamphlets at the heretics like bullets from his six-gun” (p.83). Similarly, Litfin approvingly compares Justin Martyr’s apologetic framework to Bill Bright’s The Four Spiritual Laws tracts (p.42). He praises Bright’s tracts for presenting a “spiritual version of the American Dream” that captures the idea of a solitary all-American hero striving for a goal and obtaining the blessings of God (p.43). I cannot help but find The Four Spiritual Laws to be a significantly incomplete, overly-individualistic conception of the gospel. That’s not to say that people didn’t come to Christ through it, only that it’s an unfortunately “thin” rather than “thick” version of the good news about Christ, missing out on the communal nature of the faith that Litfin rightly highlights earlier in the book.

**Conclusion**

Despite these shortcomings, Litfin’s Getting to Know the Church Fathers is a fairly solid introduction to the patristic writers, especially for those suspicious that they are too “Catholic” to have anything good to say to evangelical ears. Litfin’s portrayal of the fathers is not flawless, but I’m whole-heartedly onboard with his overarching project of rehabilitating the reputation of the church fathers in the evangelical community. What are some good next steps for those hungry to learn more after finishing this book? I would definitely suggest Robert Louis Wilken’s beautiful The Spirit of Early Christian Thought. Another excellent choice for further immersing oneself is Christopher A. Hall’s series of books: Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers, Learning Theology with the Church Fathers, and Worshiping with the Church Fathers. What many Christians seek in this day and age is a greater sense of rootedness. The Patristic era isn’t the only place to turn to, but I do think it truly is a rich resource that many readers can use to grow deeper in their faith. Getting to Know the Church Fathers is a fairly good starting point for that journey.\*Disclosure: I received this book free from Baker Academic for review

purposes. The opinions I have expressed are my own, and I was not required to write a positive review.\*\*More theology book reviews can be found at [Tabletalktheology.com](http://Tabletalktheology.com)

For many evangelicals today, church history looks something like this: the Bible . . . the Reformation . . . my denomination's founding . . . my church's founding. Or it might be more like this: the Bible . . . something something something . . . my church's founding (within the last couple of decades). In my experience, lots of churches express a desire to have a biblical church or first-century church but have little regard for two millennia of history between then and now. (To be clear, I am writing as a conservative evangelical in the U.S., and acknowledge my own limited experience.) Bryan Litfin definitely writes from a quintessential American Evangelical perspective. His father, Duane Litfin, taught at Dallas Theological Seminary and was a long-time president of Wheaton College. Bryan Litfin went to DTS and now teaches at Moody Bible Institute. Even with that pedigree, Litfin holds the early church, including the Church Fathers of the first several centuries of church history, in high regard. In *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction*, Litfin invites his fellow evangelicals to appreciate the importance of these early shapers of the faith we share. For *Getting to Know*, Litfin selects his "top ten list" of early Christians whose writing, leadership, and theology shaped the church. His list includes obvious choices like Origen, Augustine, and Justin Martyr, but also includes a "church mother," Perpetua of Carthage, and Patrick of Ireland, who (I don't think) is not typically counted among the church fathers. Litfin's selections include biographical information, a discussion of each church father's writings and theological importance, and their impact on the formation of the church, as well as a selection from their own writings. Unsurprisingly, each of them come across as evangelical. More than a reflection of Litfin's theological perspective, Litfin reveals the genuine, passionate faith these early leaders of the church shared. To our detriment, evangelicals "are being robbed of their ancient heritage precisely because they have equated the word 'catholic' with being 'Roman Catholic.'" Litfin shows that "all the centuries of Christian history are our [every Christian's] rightful possession." While not comprehensive, and while written from a decidedly evangelical perspective, Litfin's book is a great resource. He reminds us of the vibrant faith of the early church, and the importance of these fathers and others in preserving the right teachings of Jesus and pointing the church in the right direction for the benefit of future generations of Christians. Our 21st century faith was built on the founding centuries of Christians. "We are small figures inevitably carried forward by the weight of the holy catholic church, whose sails are filled by the mighty wind of the Holy Spirit." Thanks to NetGalley and the publisher for the complimentary electronic review copy!



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