



## **Introduction: Living Wisely with the Church Fathers**

by Christopher Hall

What should you keep in mind as you begin to read *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers* (LWCF)?

I wrote *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers* as the last volume of a four-book series on the church fathers: *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (how the fathers interpreted the Bible), *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (key theological insights of the fathers), *Worshiping with the Church Fathers* (baptism, Eucharist, worship, and prayer), and *Living Wisely with the Church Fathers* (ethics).

I mention that LWCF is part of a larger series because you will likely have questions come to mind that are not addressed in LWCF, but are addressed in earlier volumes. For instance, some readers might ask, “What is a church father?” “Does the title ‘church father’ have a specific definition?” “What qualifies an ancient Christian to be called a church father?” “And what of church mothers? Were there no women who were thinking about ethical issues in the ancient church?”

These are important questions that I’ve addressed in earlier volumes in the series. I wanted LWCF to be able to stand on its own, but I also didn’t want to burden readers of the entire series by being unnecessarily repetitive. You’ll have to gauge how successful I’ve been.

Here is the key question I try to answer in the book: “What characterizes a good life lived well before God?” This question deeply interested almost all ancients, Christian or not. The importance of living a good life before God or the gods was an issue most educated people thought important to ponder and then practice. Yes, there were profligates such as Nero; the Romans struggled to live up to their own standards, and we can identify various cultural vices. Many, though, attempted to live life well. Seneca, the tutor of Nero—a job that ultimately cost him his life—comes to mind. As for the poor, most struggled simply to stay alive. As we will see, life was cheap in the Roman world.

The culture of Rome and its political, religious, and ethical ideas and practices were intimately linked to those of Greece. You will want to consider carefully the distinction I make between Greek *paideia* and Christian spiritual formation. Greek *paideia*, the Greek curriculum and method designed to teach children to live well as members of Greek society, was familiar to many church fathers. Many had received a solid Greek education.

Greek thinkers in general and perhaps their greatest philosopher—Aristotle—understood the importance of habit formation, *askesis* (training), and imitation as key components of moral formation. The church fathers, as we will see often in LWCF, agreed with this general Greco-Roman consensus.



But the church fathers were also Christians. They understood and taught that moral formation and ethical reflection *should be centered on Jesus*. To be morally formed was to be deeply shaped into the image of Christ. The imitation of Jesus' life was encouraged and pursued by the ancient Christian community.

To be ethically informed demanded an immersion in Jesus' teaching. Not only so, moral transformation—in thinking and living—absolutely *required the grace of God* and *the empowerment of the Holy Spirit*, Christian ideas foreign to Greek and Roman perspectives.

The introduction to LWCF focuses on these matters in greater detail. Then, as we move into the main body of the text, we'll be exploring the church fathers' thoughts and practices concerning key ethical issues. Always remember these early Christian leaders, most bishops and pastors, were very concerned about *how Christians thought and how Christians behaved*. A Christian who claimed to be thinking well about ethical issues, but was leading a hellish life, would be a horror for the fathers.

Now, as we begin our study together, allow your mind to descend into your heart. As we read through LWCF, always keep in mind this important question: "How might the thinking of these ancient Christians, all part of my Christian family, inform my ethical thinking and behavior in the modern world?"

### **Our Reading Schedule:**

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|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. May 14-20, 2018        | Introduction, Chapter One |
| 2. May 21-27, 2018        | Chapter Two               |
| 3. May 28 – June 3, 2018  | Chapter Three             |
| 4. June 4-10, 2018        | Chapter Four              |
| 5. June 11-17, 2018       | Chapter Five; Chapter Six |
| 6. June 18-24, 2018       | Chapter Seven             |
| 7. June 25 – July 1, 2018 | Chapter Eight             |