



### Study Guide

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

#### Chapters Four and Five – “The Closest of Relationships”, “One Hope, One Desire, One Way of Life.”

By Chris Hall

In this study guide for the next two weeks—like in other weeks’ guides—I don’t simply want to outline chapters four and five for you or repeat what you can read there. Rather, I’d like to raise some issues that are related to these chapters and are, I believe, especially relevant to our lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Ancient Christian perspectives relate to modern Christian concerns in significant ways. For instance, our ancient Christian friends were very concerned about the family and cultural influences that threatened a Roman Christian family’s health and wholeness. We, too, are aware of modern cultural dynamics that threaten the family’s integrity and too easily introduce cultural viruses and infections into the family’s bloodstream.

Yet, there are also profound differences between ancient and modern Christian points of view. It is these differences that help to shed light on our modern sensibilities and practices and might well pinpoint hairline fractures in modern perspectives.

#### **The Idolization of the Family**

- At the beginning of chapter four, I mention that while the church fathers were very concerned about family issues, they did not believe that the family was the number one priority for God’s image-bearers. They took the values of Jesus and Jesus’ kingdom very seriously and knew that Jesus taught that love for him and his kingdom was the top priority for his disciple. In a powerful hyperbole, Jesus said that anyone who does not hate his father, mother, wife, children, brother and sister, “even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26ff). Jesus was insistent that he and his kingdom *must come first*. When you read Jesus’ words, how do you find yourself responding? Yes, he is purposely exaggerating. That is what hyperbole is. But he’s exaggerating to make a point. How would you explain to another believer the purpose and point of Jesus’ hyperbole?
- Early Christians were not surprised that apprenticeship to Jesus often entailed tremendous family sacrifices. Indeed, before the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, Christian families lived in constant jeopardy because of their allegiance to Jesus as their king. Fathers often ended up separated from mothers and children. Christian children might be sold into slavery or sent off to the salt mines. Sometimes martyrdoms occurred.
- Christians across the centuries understood clearly that Jesus as might well ask tremendous sacrifices of them and their families. I think, for instance, of the Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson. When Judson and his new wife headed off to Asia to preach the gospel they knew the high likelihood that one of them would die of sickness or from other threats. They also realized that any children born overseas probably would die at an early age. And such indeed was the



case. Most missionaries to Asia and Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were told by mission leaders that they could expect to lose at least one to two children, if not more. *We must remember that these folks didn't love their children once bit less than we do ours.* Yet, I think, their attitude toward familial sacrifice on behalf of Christ represents clearly the perspective of the ancient church and that of the church up through the 1950s.

- It is against this backdrop of allegiance to Christ and his cruciform kingdom that the present Christian tendency to idolize the family must be measured. Food for thought. This might be a topic you could discuss together in your reading groups.

### Sexual Sin in the Church

On June 3, 2018, the *Washington Post* published an article related to the level of sexual abuse occurring within evangelical churches and the failure of evangelical leaders and pastors to deal adequately with this pressing issue. It is a very fair article. Other indicators show that though we may trumpet high family values, the empirical data indicate something is terribly awry. High divorce rates among evangelicals (some studies indicate higher than in the secular culture); high levels of pornography use among pastors and lay people; increasing molestation of children; abuse of women, and other sexual sins increasingly mark the evangelical world.

What to do? Among other things, we need to revisit the teaching of the church fathers on *disordered desire*. In a word, ancient Christians did not trust the SELF. Because they firmly believed that the post-fall self was terribly bent – *incurvatus in se* – curved in on itself away from its creator, they understood self's desires and loves were often deeply disordered. So, the fathers would be deeply suspicious of any cultural emphasis on loving the self *apart from a prior emphasis on loving Christ and the neighbor first*. I encourage you to ponder seriously these ancient perspectives:

- A disordered self will love and act in a disordered manner. *Human misery is always the result.* Thus, the church fathers urge us to cultivate self-control and self-discipline. *This was s a big issue for the ancient church.*
- **I think it's fair to say that we live in a cultural context where the bent self is running amuck. The result is increasing moral chaos on a broad scale.**
- My wife Debbie and I were talking the other night, and she mentioned that we live in a *hypersexualized culture* that has infected the church and our families. The church fathers also lived in a sexually overheated culture. Their perspectives and responses can help us in our modern context.

### The Gift of Singleness

The ancient church viewed the single life—by definition, the life of a virgin— as an especially prized vocation. For single people, whether male or female, could devote their lives to Christ and his kingdom in a manner not possible for married folks. Yes, the church realized singleness possessed its own set of challenges. The church was realistic about the strength of human sexual drives, but genuinely believed it



was possible to learn to live a sexually stable, sane life as a single person. The gifting and strength single needed was provided in the power of the Spirit and the community of the church, a community promoted high sexual standards and treated sexual sin with great seriousness.

All image-bearers face key questions, questions whose answer may change over the course of our lives: “What is God calling me to do with my life? What is the vocation he is offering to me? And how can I live my sexual life well within that vocation?” I think it is likely that God offers more people singleness and virginity than we might imagine. A sexually overheated society so easily blurs our perspective. How can we encourage single people in their vocation? Who are the exemplars from the church’s past that can serve as models for those pursuing singleness as a high and holy call today?

**To close for this week’s guide:** A hypersexualized culture can blind Christians to many possibilities for holy, fulfilled living. How can we help one another to live sane, fulfilled lives as sexual beings, whether we be married or single? We will surely have to swim upstream against the cultural currents of an indulgent, self-centered, hot tub culture. We have life and wisdom to offer to our culture’s damaged image-bearers, but first we need to look in the mirror and ask the tough question: “How has the world squeezed me into its own mold?” (Romans 12:1) What are the disordered loves he is asking me to acknowledge—and with his help—change? Jesus is offering holiness and wholeness to all his image-bearers. Where are they found? On the path of deep repentance and a firm “no” to self-deception and self-indulgence. And what does Jesus offer us in return? Freedom.