

HERMENEUTICS by Harold Anderson

HISTORY OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION (PART II)

EARLY CHURCH FATHERS. The first of these lived in the first century A.D. We know very little about their hermeneutics. We do know that their writings were filled with Old Testament quotations, and they saw the Old Testament as pointing toward Christ. The early church fathers started well, but they were soon influenced by allegorizing due to their interest in the teachings of the Greek philosophers. Justyn Martyr (100-164) quoted frequently from the Scriptures in his writings, emphasizing Christ in the Old Testament. He was very educated and liked to use his knowledge of Greek philosophy to illustrate the teachings of Scripture. He tended to carry his teaching on types to extremes and is said to be wild and extravagant in his approach. Irenaeus (130-202) opposed the Gnostics and stressed the need to understand the Bible in its obvious and natural sense. He frequently appealed to tradition, saying the true exposition of Scripture should be done by those who could claim apostolic succession. Tertullian (160-220) taught that the Bible is the property of the church. He believed that the answer to heresy is the teachings of orthodoxy held by the church. Tertullian believed that the Bible passages should be taken in their original sense. Like Irenaeus his typology was more like allegorizing. Justin, Tertullian, and Irenaeus led the way for church tradition as a higher authority, a view that became dominant in the Middle Ages.

TWO SCHOOLS OF INTERPRETATION. About 200 years after Christ, two schools of thought developed in the church regarding the interpretation of the Bible. The first of these was in Alexandria, Egypt. Clement of Alexandria (155-216) said that any passage from the bible may have up to five meanings: historical, doctrinal, prophetic, philosophical, and mystical. The other school was in Antioch (Syria). The scholars in Antioch stressed the importance of interpreting the Bible literally. They stressed the study of original languages, and they wrote commentaries on the Scriptures. The basis for uniting the Old and New Testaments was typology and predictive prophecy rather than allegorizing. The divisions represented by these two schools of interpretation continue to exist to this day.

Tomorrow we will look at the rise of the allegorical method and the late church fathers.