

## Series Foreword

In his book *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, Robert Louis Wilken reminds us that “Christianity is more than a set of devotional practices and a moral code: it is also a way of thinking about God, about human beings, about the world and history.”<sup>1</sup> From its earliest times, Wilken notes, Christianity has been inescapably ritualistic, uncompromisingly moral, and unapologetically intellectual.

Christianity is deeply rooted in history and continues to be nourished by the past. The ground of its being and the basis of its existence is the life of a historic person, Jesus of Nazareth, whom Christians identify as God’s unique, historical act of self-communication. Jesus presented himself within the context of the history of the people of Israel, and the earliest disciples understood him to be the culmination of that history, ushering in a new chapter in God’s ongoing engagement with the world.

The crucial period of the first few centuries of Christianity is known as the patristic era or the time of the church fathers. Beginning after the books of the New Testament were written and continuing until the dawn of the Middle Ages, this period

1. Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), xiii.

## UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE CHURCH

(c. 100–700 CE) encompasses a large and diverse company of thinkers and personalities. Some came from Greece and Asia Minor, others from Palestine and Egypt, and still others from Spain, Italy, North Africa, Syria, and present-day Iraq. Some wrote in Greek, others in Latin, and others in Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and other languages.

This is the period during which options of belief and practice were accepted or rejected. Christian teachers and thinkers forged the language to express Christian belief clearly and precisely; they oversaw the life of the Christian people in worship and communal structure; and they clarified and applied the worshipping community's moral norms.

Every generation of Christians that has reconsidered the adequacy of its practice and witness and has reflected seriously on what Christians confess and teach has come to recognize the church fathers as a precious inheritance and source for instruction and illumination. After the New Testament, no body of Christian literature has laid greater claim on Christians as a whole.

The purpose of this series is to invite readers “to return to the sources,” to discover firsthand the riches of the common Christian tradition and to gain a deeper understanding of the faith and practices of early Christianity. When we recognize how Christian faith and practices developed through time, we also appreciate how Christianity still reflects the events, thought, and social conditions of this earlier history.

*Ad Fontes: Sources of Early Christian Thought* makes foundational texts accessible through modern, readable English translations and brief introductions that lay out the context of these documents. Each volume brings together the best recent scholarship on the topic and gives voice to varying points of view to illustrate the diversity of early Christian

thought. Entire writings or sections of writings are provided to allow the reader to see the context and flow of the argument.

Together, these texts not only chronicle how Christian faith and practice came to adopt its basic shape but also summon contemporary readers to consider how the events, insights, and social conditions of the early church continue to inform Christianity in the twenty-first century.

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