

## *Ancient Christian Doctrine*

Thomas C. Oden, series ed. *Ancient Christian Doctrine*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009. 5 vols. \$250.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780830825301 (set).

This five-volume set, *Ancient Christian Doctrine*, follows the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* also published by InterVarsity Press. The other commentary involved many of the same editors who contributed to *Ancient Christian Doctrine* and has been well received as an introductory-level commentary to scripture. What is refreshing about this new publication, however, is that while commentaries on scripture are numerous, there are not nearly as many works that examine the text of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. (This review is based on my reading of the first volume in the series, entitled “We Believe in One God.”) What sets *Ancient Christian Doctrine* apart is that the format follows the words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed sequentially; thus, in essence this multi-volume set is a commentary that “allows readers to crawl through the phrases of the creed” (xi). Through this work readers can come to understand the historical context and the early theological viewpoints that formed the Nicene Creed.

The editors of *Ancient Christian Doctrine* have newly translated the works of the Fathers included in the volumes, but for the Nicene Creed they collectively chose to use the translation adopted by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy. This version of the creed was included in a volume entitled *Prayers We Have Common* published in 1975. Since then it has been retranslated, but the version used in *Ancient Christian Doctrine* is still the most widely used. It is printed in both the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer and the Lutheran Book of Worship. This version is also said in most Roman Catholic Churches. Although many Eastern churches do use a slightly different translation, the universality of this translation makes it an appropriate choice for this reference work.

The first volume is entitled “We Believe in One God.” A colorful reprint of *Adoration of the Trinity* by Albrecht Dürer jackets this hardcover book. The painting is a perfect artistic representation of the intent of *Ancient Christian Doctrine*, both in style and subject. Christ is on the cross, adored by the wise men below, God the Father is present with Christ and they are one, while the dove, representing the Holy Spirit, is just above. Thus, Trinitarian monotheism is the subject of the work as it is the essence of the first phrase of the creed. Although Dürer was a German, the style of the painting is distinctly Venetian and both Eastern and Western at the same time. “We Believe in One God” attempts to capture for us the beliefs of the whole church as stated in the Nicene Creed and defended by the early Fathers. As Thomas C. Oden, the series editor, writes of the early Fathers, “All believers have a right to the most faithful consensual teachers of God’s revelation. These influential minds are the common possession of the whole church.” Oden then defines the “whole church” as being “of all generations, East and West” (xv), indicating that this work attempts to be impartial towards any particular branch of Christianity.

The general introduction, written by Oden, is only included in the first volume but serves as an introduction to all five volumes and answers the question, “Why the Creed?” Oden points out that the Latin word “Credo” actually meant belief. An early Christian who made an outright statement about belief and thus risked disloyalty to Caesar stood in the face of great persecution, even unto death. Much attention is given to the fact that the Nicene and

other early creeds were the result of pre-baptismal teaching and a way for new converts to declare faith in the triune Christian God. The editors make the argument that there was an orthodox faith during the third and fourth centuries that was defended by the Fathers, but this was also a world of confusion and false teaching. Many of the same confusions exist today arising from publications that discuss DaVinci decoded and the sexual relations of the Messiah (xiv). The creed should serve today as “the decisive symbol of faith” (xiii), as was the intent in 325 A.D. Oden also provides the reader with a bit of information about the content, selection, and translation of the original texts and how one can most benefit from this new series.

Following the general introduction is a volume-specific introduction to the first article of the creed in which Gerald L. Bray provides a more technical description of the historical context for the Nicene Creed in the light of theological controversy. This introduction sets out to provide the reader “with complete confidence that the writings of the classical church Fathers remain primary witnesses for what the early church believed and taught” (xxxix). Bray accomplishes this by outlining the development of, and the reliance on, the scriptural canon as a foundation of belief. Here his Protestantism is slightly revealed, as he is not favorable to the books known as the Apocrypha, arguing that these books were never used in a significant way to establish doctrine (xxix). The Protestant bias of this work also appears in the essay on historical context in the section entitled “We Believe.” Here Oden argues that matters of doctrine could only be decided based on scripture and that there was no precedent for an appeal to apostolic authority (2). Many branches of the Christian Church, however, rely on tradition and the Holy Spirit along with scripture as sources of divine revelation. So it is with minor points like these that this volume may fall short of its ecumenical aspirations. After some discussion of the meaning of Gnosticism and syncretism with other religions, Bray concludes that the early church was orthodox and the writing of the Fathers represents accurately what the church believed.

After the introductory portion of the first volume there are eight sections: “We Believe,” “In One God,” “The Father,” “The Almighty,” “Maker,” “Of Heaven and Earth,” “Of All that is Seen,” “And Unseen.” At the beginning of each section or chapter is the phrase taken from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in Greek, Latin, and English translations, bolded for emphasis and followed by an essay on historical context. The sections on historical context are central to this work because they describe the political, social, and cultural climate in which the doctrines of the creed were formed.

The section that follows historical context is called the “Overview.” It summarizes the beliefs held that are then subsequently supported by quotations or phrases from the church Fathers. In paragraph form, a sentence or two is provided, summing up a theological position followed by an informal citation. I found the overview portion a bit hard to read because the writing is constantly broken up by parenthetical citations. Neither does the overview accomplish what the selected writings of church Fathers cannot. The last section concerning the phrase “And Unseen” is particularly interesting because it is concerned with heaven, hell, demons, and angels. The editor suggests that this is an area where the Fathers may have been in theological error but also admits that the scripture is particularly reticent on these topics.

These eight sections, each named after a phrase of the creed, are then broken down into topical subsections that help to define the Nicene Creed and summarize the thought of the church Fathers. From a critical perspective, however, the portions of writings provided are too short and many times seem taken out of context. It is very difficult to get to the true heart of what the Fathers are saying, causing the work to be less scholarly than hoped. Even though large segments of early Christian texts are not provided, the achievement of *Ancient Christian Doctrine* is that all

the selections are freshly translated for today's readers and appropriately arranged around the beliefs held in the creed. The editors have explained that the aim of this work is not scholarly. Oden writes, "Please remember the self-imposed limitations of these volumes . . . the audience includes lay readers and not professionals alone" (xix). Bray supports the pastoral aims of this work in the introduction to this volume, saying that this work is meant "for the edification of believers" (xli). I would add that it could almost be used as a devotional piece. In fact, at times as I was writing this review, I found myself using "We Believe in One God" as inspirational reading while enjoying my morning coffee.

*Ancient Christian Doctrine* is helpful in making the Nicene Creed accessible to a broad range of readers. Despite its minor flaws, it is a well-organized commentary on the most important statement of faith in the Christian world. It is also unique in that it provides original translations of classic Christian texts to explain the Creed. This work is ecumenical by virtue of the subject as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is a unifying statement of faith. Its intent is to follow in the footsteps of the Fathers by utilizing quotes to glorify God and make known his salvation in Jesus Christ (xli). *Ancient Christian Doctrine* would be a useful addition to the reference collection of any divinity school library and a great purchase for anyone who recites the Nicene Creed and wants to do so in the same spirit by which so many have said it before.

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