

For the reading table

Reclaiming ancient Christianity

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This past summer as I visited ecumenical communities in Scotland (Iona), England (Northumbria), and France (Taizé), I was astounded to find that these places of impressive renewal could not be neatly categorized using the labels with which we North Americans are so familiar: charismatic, liturgical, orthodox, evangelical, catholic. They blended riches from all of those streams.

Here in North America, we see hints that the dividing walls of the Reformation are breaking down. More and more, people look to theologies and spiritualities (Celtic, Benedictine, Franciscan, Desert Fathers and Mothers) or theologians and mystics (Julian of

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One interesting development is the reclaiming of “ancient Christianity,” the patristic era of the church fathers, i.e., the early centuries of the church.

Thomas C. Oden began this trend in the 1980s with a series of books on pastoral care based largely on classical resources: *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983); *Crisis Ministries* (New York: Crossroad, 1986); *Pastoral Counsel* (New York: Crossroad, 1989); and *Ministry*

through Word and Sacrament (New York: Crossroad, 1989). I lack space to review them here, except to note that all are worthy introductions to both classical Christian literature and practical pastoral theology. (I particularly like the way Oden quotes Menno Simons as a classic theologian.)

Oden’s long-standing interest in classical Christianity is also shown in his editing of the stunning *Ancient Christian*

Commentary on Scripture series (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Pr.). Volumes to date include: *Mark*, edited by Oden and Christopher A. Hall (1998); *Romans*, edited by Gerald Bray (2000); *1-2 Corinthians*, edited by Bray (1999); *Galatians*, *Ephesians*, *Philippians*, edited by Mark J. Edwards (1999); *Colossians*, *1-2 Thessalonians*, *1-2 Timothy*, *Titus*, *Philemon*, edited by Peter Gorday (2000); *James*, *1-2 Peter*, *1-3 John*, *Jude*, edited by Bray (2000). Commentaries are projected for all the books of the Bible, including the Original Testament.

These commentaries are welcome supplementary sources for preaching. The editors divide the text into sections. Then they

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excerpt pithy quotes and paragraphs from a host of ancient commentators—Augustine, Gregory Nazianzen, Cassiodorus, and John Chrysostom, for example—to display how ancient Christians understood this text. The range and variety of insights gives this a Midrash feel. This approach makes texts accessible that might otherwise be difficult to wade through or even locate. I like the offbeat and unexpected insights into familiar Scripture texts.

But this approach is limited. We may be ready to concede that ancient Christian hermeneutics are different from ours, but can we embrace this way of studying Scripture? Since the commentaries give us excerpts, we

cannot be sure that the selections do justice to the early texts. Most importantly, one lacks a sense of flow as one works through the commentaries. At times, it may feel as though we are being given pithy quotes to make us sound more scholarly. So we must use these with sensible caution.

To learn more about how church fathers read and studied Scriptures in the first seven centuries, consult *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), by commentary co-editor Christopher A. Hall. While this book is not easy reading, it shows that our modern assumptions about individual and objective interpretation are recent understandings and did not characterize early readings of Scripture. Hall's reading

of the church fathers confirms an important Anabaptist insight: biblical interpretation needs to be communal. Furthermore, he shows that theology and biblical study must be done in a context of worship and prayer: exegesis is related to spiritual formation and character development. If we take this seriously, Scripture study becomes spiritual discernment and we approach the Scriptures with a sense of wonder. Hall also shows us that the ancient fathers addressed many current problems. One reason to take these ancient writers seriously is the simple fact that they were closer in time to the writing of Scriptures and thus had insights into the context and intent of the Scriptures that we do not easily attain. Hall makes a good case that “Protestants need to stop acting as if they are a traditionless community within Christendom.”

Robert E. Webber is an anomaly: a popular evangelical speaker and writer, he is an unabashed promoter of high church worship and liturgy. Raised as a fundamentalist (with a degree from Bob Jones University), at some point he became enamored of ancient Christianity. In *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Bks., 1999), Webber contends that the ancient Christian worldview has much to offer a postmodern age: subjective experiences of mystery and beauty; metanarratives beyond relativity; and transcendence, symbolism, and beauty in the midst of life’s complexities. He reminds us that most Reformers wanted to return to what he calls “classical Christianity.”

I enjoyed Webber’s book, although in his haste to make summaries and draw conclusions his generalizations sometimes become too sweeping. In teaching in the congregation one can draw on his helpful explications of many Christian doctrines and ideas: Christus Victor, the power of evil, the incarnation, among others. I appreciated Webber’s rejection both of a narrowly sacrificial view of the atonement and of speaking of Christ only in terms of individual salvation. He spells out the implications of his patristic reading for worship, the area of expertise for which he is best known. This readable book would make a rewarding study for church groups.

A book that speaks most directly to Anabaptists is D. H. Williams’ *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A*

Primer for Suspicious Protestants (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Williams is an evangelical (an ordained Baptist minister) who teaches in a Catholic university. He addresses the problem of many Free Church believers (including Anabaptists) who suspect tradition but fail to recognize their own connections to classical Christianity.

Williams notes the current developing interest in classical Christianity and the amazing availability of resources to fuel that interest. The time is right to overcome our theological amnesia and resist succumbing to “the tyranny of the new.” Williams does not argue that we should abandon our churches. He believes one can be both Free Church and respectful of ancient Christian traditions. In fact, tradition itself is a blend of continuity and change. Williams often specifically cites and challenges Anabaptist views, reflecting at times on the thought of H. S. Bender and John H. Yoder.

Williams is most concerned about what Philip Schaff once called the “poisonous plant of sectarianism,” an elevation of individual conscience that constantly divides the church into more and more schismatic groups. I share his grief at the continued divisions and welcome this volume as a guide to new directions.

Williams makes a compelling case for re-engaging history in a serious fashion and asserts that God’s sovereignty also means trusting church history. Like Webber, he argues against privatizing and ahistorical tendencies in the belief systems of evangelicals and other Protestants.

While I welcome all these introductions to ancient Christianity, I am wary of idealizing that time as one of idyllic unity. The battles waged among various church factions and theologians then make current Mennonite ecclesiastical troubles look like kittens frolicking. And, as we well know, not all the fruit of ancient Christianity was good. Nevertheless, this new interest in ancient times dispels the illusion that true Christian history ended shortly after Christ and did not resume until the sixteenth century.