



Here in this issue we decided to interview a patristic scholar Prof. Dr. Fairbairn



Dr. Fairbairn, on behalf of the ETF, I would like to express appreciation for your input here in Leuven, though you already have a full load at Erskine. Now—some questions. As a defender of 'Christian orthodoxy,' what would you say are the criteria by which you decide what it is?

Obviously, the standard for orthodoxy is and always has been Scripture, and it is noteworthy that the vast majority of polemical texts from the patristic period are extended treatises on the interpretation of Scripture. For example, Athanasius' *Contra Arianos* is an exhaustive analysis of all the passages on which Arius has based his arguments, and Athanasius shows that Arius is using the Bible incorrectly.

As we seek to remember and to articulate orthodoxy today, I think we need to give a great deal of weight to what previous generations of Christians have claimed to be the orthodox interpretation of Scripture. It is not true, as many modern historians would have us believe, that there were many orthodoxies early on and then that a single orthodoxy was gradually imposed. The scholarship that argues this usually focuses excessively on terminology and regards "the making of orthodoxy" as the (arbitrary) imposition of a uniform terminology on the entire Church. This scholarship is CORRECT that terminology was imprecise prior to the fourth and fifth centuries, but it fails to recognize that the underlying view of salvation, and thus the views of God and of man that go with that soteriology, were generally fairly uniform from early in Christian history. I believe that if we are to recognize the consistency of "orthodoxy" in the first few centuries of the Church, we need to look carefully at soteriology, not just at the hot button issues like the

terminology with which one speaks of God and Christ. Very few people in the Greek East were able to use Trinitarian and Christological terms as precisely in Greek as they were being used in Latin, but this does not mean that the East had no consensus about orthodoxy. The consensus was there, and it was expressed by saying something like, "On the basis of Scripture and the Church's tradition, this is the kind of salvation we know we have, so we know that humanity must be like this, and God must be like this, because only such a humanity NEEDS this kind of salvation, and only such a God can GIVE it to us." I think that if we listen to Scripture and to what the Church has said about Scripture with this kind of issue in mind, we will be better able to hear the Church's *consensus fidei* that has been recognized as "orthodoxy" throughout Christian history.

Q. From the standpoint of historical theology, how do you respond to the critics' typical assertion that orthodoxy was merely a survivor game, a phenomenon of political 'winners' eliminating 'losers'?

I am convinced that this typical assertion is a relatively late arrival on the scene of historical theology. Up till at least the year 1700, and probably 1800, the Church's way of presenting its early theological history seems to me to have focused on an agreed-on *consensus fidei* (which I discussed in response to the previous question) which was brought into question by certain people. As the consensus was questioned, the Church drew its attention to the issue under consideration, re-affirmed and clarified that consensus, and (when necessary) declared the thought of those who had called its consensus into question to be heretical. So I insist that the doctrinal controversies of the fourth through eighth centuries were not cases of many acceptable views being suppressed so that one (arbitrarily chosen) view would alone become acceptable. Nor were these controversies cases of two or three equally-represented "schools" clashing and either compromising or fighting until only one remained standing. Instead, there was a consensus that was opposed by a few, and the controversy had to do with how best to re-express that

consensus in light of the problems that "the few" had identified. For example, Arianism was certainly NOT a viable option that the Church suppressed with political pressure. Quite the contrary, there was really very little doubt that Arius was wrong, and it was only the support of the Arian emperor Constantius that allowed Arianism to remain around as long as it did. The real issue was not whether Arius was wrong, but how best to express the implicitly-accepted belief that the Son and Spirit had to be equal to the Father in order to save us. Arius had raised a question that forced the Church to re-examine that formulation, but his own formulation was utterly unacceptable. Similarly, Nestorius was not the exemplar of a perfectly acceptable "school" for explaining Christology. At Ephesus, he was THEOLOGICALLY standing basically alone, as careful study of men like John of Antioch and Theodoret shows. He had POLITICAL support because his allies did not realize that his Christology was quite different from theirs. Once they did realize this, they properly rejected him and made peace with Cyril of Alexandria through the Formula of Reunion. Nestorianism was NOT an acceptable view that was squelched for purely political reasons. Again, the opposite was the case: Nestorius' political support was what prevented people from seeing the problems with his Christology at first, but no amount of political support could enable him to stand against the pressure of the Church's *consensus fidei* once it became clear that he opposed this consensus.

Q. We have recently witnessed some protestant and even Evangelical scholars convert to Eastern Orthodoxy (e.g., J. Pelikan) or to Catholicism (e.g., F. Beckwith). What would you say are some aspects of the Reformation essential in rediscovering Evangelical roots in classic Christian orthodoxy? How can the Evangelical community do better?

I think that in many cases, conversions to Eastern Orthodoxy or Roman Catholicism are related to one or more of the following factors: First, a frustration with the perceived shallowness of evangelicalism, especially evangelical worship. Second, a disgust with the lack of concern for continuity and history on the part of many evangelicals. Third, a rejection of the logically “cut and dried” nature of much evangelical theology and a hunger for mystery. What I think often happens is that people’s concern for these issues blinds them to the serious theological problems with Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. I often say that these three problems with evangelicalism are real, but they do not constitute a reason to leave. Converting to Roman Catholicism or Orthodoxy will force one to trade these problems for other problems that may very well be more severe. I think a better way to deal with these three evangelical problems would be to espouse what could be called “catholic evangelicalism,” an evangelical faith that recognizes that the great insights of the entire Church are a part of our heritage and should be a part of our expression of the faith. For example, a focus on the relationship between the Father and the Son is a part of the Reformation heritage just as much as it is a part of the Orthodox heritage, and in fact, some of the reformers (notably Calvin) placed great emphasis on this. Yet the link between the Father-Son relationship and the believer’s relationship to God is dramatically underplayed in the post-Reformation history of Protestantism (even among Calvin’s followers). If we recapture this aspect of our faith, I believe it will significantly deepen our theology, cement the link between our theology and our spirituality, and affect our worship as well.

Q. How would you understand the relationship between 'spirituality' and doctrine or theology?

I think there are two major mistakes to avoid here. The first is the elevation of doctrine above spirituality, as if correct doctrine were the only important thing. The second is the separation of spirituality from doctrine, as if doctrine were merely a set of necessary formalities that have to be

believed but that don’t directly impact the way we live Christian life. I find that many evangelicals are guilty of one or the other of these mistakes. In particular, I fear that we often leave the average church goer with no sense of the connection between doctrine and spirituality.

In contrast to either of these mistakes, I think the proper way to deal with doctrine and spirituality is to emphasize that the truths, the doctrines, are designed to point to a specific relationship, that between the Father and the Son. That relationship is also the basis for our relationship with God, and Christian life (spirituality) is a way of “being who we are,” reflecting in our interaction within our families, churches, and communities the Father-Son relationship in which we participate through the Holy Spirit’s indwelling. As I hinted above, I believe this relationship is key to understanding Scripture, Christian theology, AND Christian spirituality, and thus it can be the link between what we believe, who we are, and what we are to do as Christians.

Q. Please share with us some of your personal scholarly passion. Why did you become a patristic scholar, and as you continue this journey what are some possibilities you would like to achieve in the near or more distant future?

I became interested in patristics in the early 1990s. I was working in Eastern Europe and studying Eastern Orthodoxy, and as I identified the key differences between modern eastern and western theology (foremost of which is a different concept of grace), I wanted to try to understand where those differences came from historically by studying the early Church. Since that time, my academic work has focused on sorting out the strands of thought in both eastern and western theology, in the hope that a clearer understanding of our histories would enable us to understand Scripture itself more accurately, and especially more comprehensively. I think there are aspects of biblical truth that have been well preserved in some branches of the Church and some time periods but largely ignored in others. Understanding the history of theology can help us to appreciate some of these strands of thought, and to appropriate them into our own theology in places where we think they are truly biblical. This is what I’m trying to do on a general level. On a more specific (and more scholarly) level, I am convinced that the way we view both patristic exegesis and patristic Christology (as clashes between two

schools—Antioch and Alexandria) is wrong. Much of my scholarly work is an attempt to refute the modern notion that the so-called “school of Antioch” was a well-represented school of the Church in ancient times.

Reviews & Annotations

Andrew Chester, *Messiah and exaltation: Jewish messianic and visionary traditions and New Testament Christology* WUNT 207 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007). xvii + 716 pgs., € 119.00

Apart from the introduction, only three (2, 4, 9) of the eight chapters are published here for the first time. Thus, they are not exactly forming a single argument, other than that they broadly concern Jewish messianism and early Christology, especially in the Second Temple period. As he indicates this in his introduction, these new chapters are designed to continue the debate and discussion. To this end he accomplishes his purpose in a clear, though sometimes pedantic, exposition. Particularly helpful is chapter 2 (“Christology and Transformation”). He surveys the various analyses of Christology since Moule’s two categories (‘evolutionary’ and ‘developmental’) since 1977, and suggests a more useful distinction that would modify Moule’s category for a sharper focus. Namely, the essential difference would be between high Christology utterly “alien and unacceptable to first-century Judaism” (thereby needing a decisively non-Jewish context) and one of development yet intelligible within a Palestinian Jewish context, though extraordinary and unprecedented in Judaism. He finds the analyses of Casey, Eskola, Bauckham and Hurtado intriguing, but unsatisfying in view of problems each position raises; he ultimately proposes a position that is comprehensive, and charts a course between the positions held by the last two. His position is uniquely highlighted by his assertion that the traditions evince Jewish figures that are transformed as they mediate and move “between the heavenly and earthly, and divine and human, spheres.” Overall, this book would invite interesting responses in the days to come.

-Michael Choi,
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