
It is commonplace today that evangelical Protestantism is pulsing with interest in early Christianity. Forty years ago, fascination with the early Christian movement spurred young North Americans to wear sandals, sport beards, and experiment with communal living. Today’s curiosity drives them to read the Church Fathers and to ask leading questions about why such early authorities have been relatively neglected in our churches. Thoughtful answers are warranted by such questions.

2009 marked the inauguration of the Wheaton College Center for Early Christian Studies. Within that program’s first year, its imprint was laid down by its hosting a notable conference, and this volume reproduces the papers. Any center for Early Christian Studies launched by gathering together such notables in this field as Robert Wilken, Everett Ferguson, Christopher Hall, and Gerald Bray (among others) has made an auspicious beginning.

The stance of the conference papers is, above all, constructive. One observes no evident purpose of challenging evangelical Protestantism’s legitimacy in light of what may be observed in early Christianity. Rather, the practical focus is on the importance of the study of early Christianity and the necessary appropriation of it by today’s churches. Each of the major papers presented was followed by a prepared rejoinder. Two main areas were explored: (1) investigation of the extent of the neglect of early Christianity by evangelicals and (2) investigation of the resources available to evangelicals by greater appropriation from the early church. This review can only highlight a portion of the entirety on offer in the volume.

As for the reasons behind the considerable neglect of early Christianity by evangelicals, Christopher Hall names several; the best of these is “inattentiveness” on the part of evangelical Christians. It can fairly be said that we have not been led to expect that studying early Christian teaching will pay dividends. Further, Hall opines that too much North American evangelicalism has done theology on the assumption that doctrinal conviction can be built up and articulated adequately by solitary appeal to the Bible alone—without any consciousness of the “jury” that is located in the history of biblical interpretation. North American evangelicalism has also shown itself to be impatient, preferring rapid rewards and resolutions.

In what I consider to be one of the most illuminating essays in the collection, Jeffrey Barbeau explores the extent to which John Wesley’s theological and pastoral stance in the era of eighteenth-century evangelical awakening was informed by his drawing on early church resources. Barbeau’s answer is that Wesley’s debt to early Christian thought and practice was very considerable—both through his own research and through his use of various handbooks available in his time aimed at conveying early church teaching. The distillation of Wesley’s readings in the early church was shared with the Methodist movement through the multi-volume *Christian Library,* which Wesley prepared to guide young preachers in his movement. Significantly, Barbeau also shows that Wesley’s
strong differences of doctrinal opinion with George Whitefield were fueled by this reflection on early Christian (especially Eastern) teaching.

Exploring recent efforts made at curing evangelical inattentiveness to the early Church, younger scholar Elesha Coffman takes up the question of how significant was the career of the late Robert Webber (1933–2007) and the “Chicago Call” of 1977. The latter gained great publicity, calling as it did for fresh attention to early Christian teaching and worship practices. In a refreshingly candid manner, Coffman proposes that the significance of this development within evangelicalism has been overrated, given its very slender numbers, its “elitism,” and non-ecclesiastical character. Who could have known that, even as he urged the launch of this movement, Webber was involved in an independent house church? In sum, the origins of the renaissance of evangelical interest in the early Christian church cannot be easily located in Webber and the Chicago Call. Having said this, the rejoinder by Christianity Today’s David Neff must not be missed!

As for the actual resources that early Christian teaching offers, laurels are in order for the honored evangelical Patristic scholar, Everett Ferguson, for his “Why Study Early Christian History and Literature?!”. In an essay that could wisely be made required reading for all theological students, Ferguson explains that a study of these early centuries can provide confirmation and elucidation of the NT and can show the path of change away from the authoritative NT teaching. These centuries also yield examples of noble lives to be emulated and examples of ecclesiastical problem-solving of recurring issues (e.g., the relation of Christianity to culture).

Scott McKnight’s incisive essay advocates that evangelical churches, many of which have hitherto looked on the early ecumenical creeds as a kind of a “no go zone,” now take these up for use in worship. One finds it hard to disagree with his insistence that by so doing, our churches would receive important reminders of the core themes of the gospel and grow in the consciousness that the one Christian faith is stable as to its content.

Gerald Bray, always weighty in his judgments, provides a stimulating (though utterly undocumented) essay in which he contends that historic evangelical Christianity has as much claim to the legacy of the early Christian centuries as the usual claimants: Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Evangelical Christianity affirms everything truly biblical affirmed by those communions and stresses (where they do not) the key element of personal appropriation of Christ’s gospel and personal godliness. The effect of this essay, appearing late in the volume (and perhaps in the conference) is bracing. It has the effect of reminding us that there is also appropriating from the Christian past needing to be pursued outside evangelicalism.

In sum, we owe a great debt to the Wheaton Center and editors, Kalantzis and Tooley, for making the resources of this conference available to the wider church.

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