



Green, Bradley G., ed.

Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy: Engaging with Early and Medieval Theologians

Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010. Pp. 398. Paper. \$30.00. ISBN 9780830838868.

Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

The past couple of decades have seen Evangelicals rediscovering a wellspring of knowledge and wisdom that their Catholic and Orthodox counterparts have taken for granted for centuries. I am of course speaking of the early Church Fathers and Doctors of the Church. InterVarsity Press has been at the forefront of this rediscovery in their publishing efforts. We've seen a number of helpful volumes from them to include the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture; Ancient Christian Texts; and Ancient Christian Doctrine series, among other books aimed at introducing an Evangelical audience to the writing and theology of the early Church. *Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy: Engaging with Early and Medieval Theologians* is one more in a long list of volumes toward that end.

The present volume, under the editorship of Bradley G. Green, gathers contributions from a number of scholars: W. Brian Shelton, Gerald Bray, Bryan Liftin, Carl Beckwith, Robert Letham, David Hogg, and Mark W. Elliott on some of the Church's most influential voices, namely Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, the Cappadocians (Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil), Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury, and Thomas Aquinas. Each chapter is roughly 40-50 pages and follows a basic format (although not slavishly so) in which a biographical sketch of the theologian is given, followed by a theological summary and

analysis/evaluation of some of the major themes in their writings, and finally a bibliography to help the reader with further research.

Not surprisingly the contributions vary in quality, for example, certain chapters are loaded with quotations from the primary sources (e.g., Bray on Tertullian; Letham on the Cappadocians; or Hogg on Anselm), which admittedly can be helpful, while others quote less from the primary sources and opt rather to summarize and offer more constructive readings (e.g., Beckwith on Athanasius or Liftin on Origen), which is preferable for this type of volume. The chapters in which the extensive quotations appear make the book feel more like a reader than a book meant to engage the theology of these early thinkers.

Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy is an extremely helpful introductory volume. The novice will learn much from reading it but those with more than a surface familiarity with the theologians covered will likely gain little from the content. For as helpful as I think this volume is for the beginning student I would suggest a few ways in which it could be improved upon. To start, it could benefit from a sharper focus. The theologians covered in this book are obvious choices because of their significant and lasting contributions to orthodox Christian theology, but they are scattered from east to west and across a number of centuries (there's a near-700 year gap between Augustine and Anselm and plenty of theologians in between!). If, perhaps, this were turned into a multi-volume series then it could follow a division similar that of Johannes Quasten's four-volume series *Patrology* with the addition of a medieval category. That would sharpen the focus in that theologians from set time periods and locales could be covered in individual volumes.

If this were turned into a multi-volume series (which IVP is no stranger to) then more important theologians who have helped to shape Christian orthodoxy could have been covered. I find it almost criminal that in a book about the shapers of Christian *orthodoxy* that there wasn't mention of a significant medieval shaper of Christian *Orthodoxy*, Gregory Palamas. In some ways this omission is understandable given that this volume is geared towards an Evangelical audience, but Orthodox theology has been making strong inroads in recent years and a chapter on Palamas would have been fantastic. There were some significant omissions from the patristic end of the spectrum as well. Cyril of Alexandria played such an important role in the 5th century Christological debates that helped to shape Christological orthodoxy that he deserves a mention. I'd add Hilary of Poitiers as another important western representative (in a book that's heavy on the eastern patristic witness).

I'll grant that turning this into a multi-volume series with sharper focus in each volume and broader coverage across the series is probably not feasible; there's still something that could have been done in this volume to make it better. Letham's chapter on the Cappadocians is fine, but it's brief in that he has to cover three theologians in the space that everyone else used to cover one. This ends up detracting from the individual contributions of each thinker and while Letham doesn't intend to perpetuate the stereotype that each Cappadocian is the same (one does not get this impression from reading his treatment), this might still be the impression gained from the decision to treat them together in a single chapter. The two Gregories and Basil's theology is much fuller and richer than we'd know from the short bit that we read about them here.

One more thing that I think would have helped this volume would have been a synthesizing chapter charting the development of Christian orthodoxy while showing the common threads that run through it all. But if left as is I'd still recommend this volume to those looking to get their feet wet in patristic or medieval theology. Why? Because at the end of the day these *are* solid introductions and the bibliographies that round out each chapter can't help but lead to much more in-depth research.