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Resource Reviews

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The Christian Librarian **TCL** **R E V I E W S**

**Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs:
a Reference Guide to More Than 700
Topics Discussed by the Early Church
Fathers**, edited by David W. Bercot.
Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998. xx,
704 pp. \$34.95. ISBN: 1-56563-357-1.

*Reviewed by Larry Reining, Director of
Library Services, Asbury College,
Wilmore, Kentucky.*

This book is a dictionary, an index, an anthology, and a theology text all in one. It is arranged as a dictionary, alphabetical by subject (including persons), but it is (at least in part) designed to serve as an index to the ten volume Ante-Nicene Fathers (ed. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 1885-87; Reprint: Hendrickson, 1994, or Eerdmans, 1950-51, and later). Each excerpt is referenced to a volume and page of the Hendrickson edition of Ante-Nicene Fathers. The entries are primarily lists of quotations, organized chronologically by author, but often have brief definitions, biographies, and other contextual explanations as needed. Pertinent scriptures are often given at the beginning of most entries or subdivisions as the basis of commentary by the various Fathers on that subject. The entries range from a few sentences to ten or more pages (usually subdivided in outline form for the more significant and lengthier topics). Extensive cross-referencing makes this work even more useful. Following each citation, the Father quoted is identified as of the Eastern or Western tradition. Translation of the original works has been modified by the editor from the very literal renderings of Roberts and Donaldson to make them more contemporary, less academic, and less long and complex in sentence structure.

This work also contains useful introductory material. In addition to the "How to use this Dictionary" and "Who's Who in the Ante-Nicene Fathers" sections, there is significant explanatory information about the importance and context of the early Fathers, as well as the criteria for the selection of quotations for this anthology. Because of their proximity to the times and the authors of Scripture, these Fathers may be among the most valuable commentators anywhere, anytime on Scripture, both in reference to canonicity and meaning. While none claimed divine inspiration, they did claim to be faithfully passing along the faith of the apostles. The style and purpose of these early believers (and often leaders

of the church) was explanation of the faith to non-believers and the nature of the Christian life: an obedient love relationship. Also included in the introductory pages is a short background sketch of the major contemporary concepts and issues that influenced the writing of these men: 1) Marcion and Gnostic heresy; 2) the concept of the Logos; and 3) the Scriptures as viewed by the early church. The scope of the work has been limited to those writings before the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) and whose authors are considered orthodox by the pre-Nicene church. It is stressed that "orthodoxy" (itself a fifth century term) is perceived by these Fathers and their church as being a set of general concepts, not meticulous theological definitions. The editor indicates that he has made every effort to be unbiased and theologically neutral with respect to Catholic and Protestant interpretations and of other various interpretive systems. The reviewer, in his perusal of the work, would conclude that the editor has succeeded well in representing straightforward historical orthodoxy.

A few examples of the type of entries included might be informative. The most significant of the early Fathers are given full-length treatment in the Dictionary itself beyond what appears in the "Who's Who" list at the beginning. Origen, for example, is given more than five pages, including sections on his life and character, his unique theological viewpoints (the three-tiered system of scripture interpretation, the pre-existence of souls, universal reconciliation, and heavenly bodies and powers), and quotations by and about him that are relevant more to him than any specific subject. The entry for "angels" is nearly seven pages in length and includes subdivisions dealing with their nature and position, guardian angels, fallen angels, and the scriptural figure of the Angel of the Lord. The entry for "parables" includes sections on principles of interpretation as well as interpretations of all those in the Gospels. Even such thorny issues as "Free Will & Predestination" are given broad universal coverage, discussing free will in humans and angels, the elect, predestination, and

synergism (the ability & need for man to cooperate in salvation). This work also provides valuable insight into those themes of the Eastern Fathers such as Recapitulation in the Atonement and the roles of grace, faith, and obedience in salvation, which often go unappreciated in the (especially Protestant) West.

This volume would be a fine addition to any library, especially as a useful complement to and index for the Ante-Nicene Fathers. It would be useful as a reference and synopsis for the pastor, scholar, or student. It would also be a good introduction to Patristics and early Christian theology for the beginner, and a bargain as well.

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