



Hall, Christopher A.

Learning Theology with the Church Fathers

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Learning Theology with the Church Fathers (hereafter *LTCF*) is Christopher Hall's follow-up to his acclaimed *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (hereafter *RSCF*). His goal with *LTCF* is much the same as it was with *RSCF*, to introduce interested readers to patristic theology. In Hall's own words this "*is simply a primer intended for beginners*" (12) The 'beginner' ranges from the rusty pastor to the seminary student to the motivated layman with a desire to understand the great theological traditions of the Christian faith.

There is a bit of a difference in the format from the last volume to this one; in *RSCF* Hall focused his attention on the eight "great doctors of the Church" (four from the East and four from the West) and the two major locales connected with patristic exegesis (i.e., Alexandria & Antioch). In this volume Hall focuses on the "central theological loci": Christology, Theology proper (i.e., the Trinity), Eschatology, and Ecclesiology by giving readings from prominent fathers on each subject.

In the second chapter "Christ the Son, Begotten and Not Made" Hall focuses mainly on Athanasius and Arius, although in my opinion he doesn't give an adequate account of the so-called Arian controversy. Hall tends to focus on the metaphysical aspect of the debate (i.e., the deity of Christ) without noting the soteriological factors that caused the questions in the first place, i.e., how can a creature save? (Athanasius) or how can the Creator assume humanity and die? (Arius).

When turning to the Trinity Hall relates a number of questions quite common among believers both old and new about the relevance of the Trinity in our lives. His answer is that for the fathers, the doctrine of the Trinity was a faithful witness to the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. Hall's theologians of choice for discussing this doctrine were Gregory of Nazianzus and Augustine, and while he couldn't have chosen two better theologians from the East and West to focus on, the treatment feels incomplete. It would

have been wonderful to see Hilary of Poitiers included as well as some of the Ante-Nicene fathers like Novatian.

When turning to “Sin, Grace, and the Human Condition” Hall looks at Irenaeus (albeit too briefly in my estimation) and the debate that raged between Augustine and Pelagius. Pelagius appears to be fairly represented by Hall in his acknowledging that:

Pelagius, then, cannot be accused of denying God’s role in helping us to obey, but he largely limits this helping role to those innate abilities God created in human nature with the creation of Adam and Eve. The choice remains for each human being as to whether he or she will choose to exercise these divinely given abilities in obedience to God and God’s commandments. (135)

So Hall doesn’t reproduce the old canard that Pelagius taught that people could save themselves or work for their salvation, although he does later critique Pelagius with clear Augustinian sympathies (as the vast majority of the Church has since the time of Augustine).

All in all Hall’s treatments of the subjects covered in *LTCF* are competent. His writing is clear and there’s nothing major to gripe with in terms of his understanding or presentation of these great doctrines of orthodoxy. My major criticism is that he has limited himself too much in terms of the witnesses he chooses to address each topic. One glaring example is that in the chapter on the Holy Spirit (ch. 5) Hall focuses solely on Basil the Great. There’s no doubt that Basil’s *On the Holy Spirit* stands as a giant among midgets in terms of fourth century pneumatological writing, but this chapter was ripe for interaction with Athanasius’ *Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit*. Another unfortunate omission was reference Origen on the eternal generation of the Son in chapters two and three, but this is for obvious reasons (i.e., Origen isn’t technically considered a ‘church father’ see p. 21).

The book is rounded out with thirty pages of end notes (God, when will they stop using these?!), a three-page subject index, and a one-page scripture index. As an introduction *LTCF* gets the job done but suffers from what in my opinion is too narrow a focus on certain fathers. I would have rather seen a broader representation of writers and a more general interaction with this larger body of works.