

[MJTM 20 (2018–2019)]

BOOK REVIEW

Michael F. Bird. *What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine Through the Apostle's Creed*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016. 239 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0310-52092-4. \$24.99

Christian theology has gained a false reputation within the Christian church as the dreadfully boring preserve of academics studying the esoteric minutiae of doctrine. The great creeds of the Christian church are included in this assessment, and some churches even take pride in their status as “non-creedal” communities of faith. In this book Michael Bird challenges the perception of theology in general, and the creeds in particular, as not useful for the average church member. He argues first for the accuracy and scriptural faithfulness of the creeds, and then for the importance of those creeds to modern Christians as they navigate their way through the difficulties of life. Through a systematic study of the Apostle's Creed, Bird presents his case for the centrality of the creeds and their importance for the life of faith.

In the preface, Bird contends that many churches have lost the value of the Creed, making no effort to “recite, teach, and confess the Apostle's Creed or any creed for that matter” (13). He recognizes the reasoning behind this choice, but believes that it stems from a flawed understanding of the history and value of the Creed, which leads churches to “saw off the theological branches upon which they are sitting” (13). To counter this problem, Bird set before himself the task of convincing those who do not believe in the need for the Creed to change their minds by a systematic study of the development of the Creed, followed by an exposition of the Creed itself to show that it is a vital summary of the true Scriptural Christian faith. He intends that his readers become more certain of their faith, united one to another in

faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, and willing to contend for the faith entrusted to the people of God.

Chapter 1 answers the question “Who Needs Creeds When I’ve Got a Bible?” (17). Bird begins with the creeds contained in Scripture, showing that the tradition of creedal statements has a sound pedigree. He then shows how the creeds carried on that biblical tradition into the life of the early church, and that the Scriptures and the creeds strengthened the church in the face of heretical doctrines that created doubt and division. The creeds became the boundary, warning that “all who proceed beyond this point do so at the peril of their own souls” (24). Finally, Bird chooses the Apostle’s Creed as the simplest place to begin studying the orthodox Christian message contained within the creedal tradition.

Chapter 2 studies the symbiotic relationship between the creeds and the Bible, showing that the growth of the established Christian canon and the creeds proceeded concurrently, and that the development of the Christian canon could not have happened without the rule of faith and the early creedal affirmations that supported Christian orthodoxy. Given this history, Bird then argues in the tradition of the Church Fathers that the creeds provide vital summaries of Christian doctrine that grow a biblical faith.

Chapters 3 through 14 then proceed to exegete the Creed, beginning with “I believe,” and developing each clause in a chapter-length discussion, unpacking the numerous doctrines that are contained within each line to show the necessity of a Trinitarian faith and its full implications. Liberally deploying scriptural support, as well as the wisdom of great theologians, Bird presents a unitary Christian orthodoxy, touching on the central doctrines while avoiding secondary and tertiary issues.

The ability to write theology in an accessible and engaging manner is vital in an age where theology has become an unpopular field of study among lay Christians. Bird has aimed the text toward the theological layperson, providing detail that stops short of being exhaustive, but still presents a concise and readable exegesis of the Apostle’s Creed. Throughout the text, Bird also provides useful footnotes containing suggestions for further

reading, enabling the reader who wants to study the topics of the book more deeply to readily put their hand upon two or three works that will guide their first steps. Coupled with his lists of recommended readings the end of each chapter, this greatly increases the usefulness of the book for basic research into the theological ideas set forth in the text. For the layperson or the beginning student of theology, these notes make his book doubly valuable as a theological text and a resource to be drawn upon in the future.

Bird exhibits a deep respect for the history of the Christian church, and additionally recognizes the changes and challenges that the church has encountered through the years. In his discussion of the Creed, he is careful to relate doctrine to the realities of the present day, and works to answer questions that may arise, such as whether the idea of the Fatherhood of God is too patriarchal a concept for the modern world. This sensitivity to the questions that develop from the present cultural context makes the book excellent for theological beginners, and even for those who have yet to come to faith.

Bird's focus on the basic exposition of creedal doctrines means that the book lacks deeper discussion of the history and development of the beliefs that make up the Creed. Additionally, the author does not fully explore the differences of interpretation found within orthodox Christianity regarding some of the creedal doctrines. These kinds of discussions are not the purpose of the book, however, and their absence is made up for by the suggested readings which point the reader to deeper studies of doctrinal nuances. Due to these limitations, the book would have to be supplemented if one planned to use it as a text for anything beyond a college-level basic theology course.

Combining humor with deep insight and a desire to find unity in the faith among Christian brothers and sisters, Bird's book is an excellent read for a beginning theological student, whether personally, in a church small group or Sunday school, or in a college setting. While not highly academic in nature, it is well researched, carefully crafted, and provides a valuable starting point for further study into the central tenets of the Christian faith. It could also provide a valuable tool for evangelism through its

clear, simple, and highly readable exposition of the core doctrines of the Christian faith. Bird amply achieves his goal of summarizing the teachings of Scripture through exposition of the Creed, helping people know the certainty of what they are being taught, encouraging unity in the faith, and contending for the faith once for all entrusted to God's people. His respect for the historical and biblical nature of the faith, and for the church that has been God's instrument for preaching it, shines through in every word, and makes this book an excellent addition to the library of any believer.

Matthew Rowley
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON