

Book Review

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2000 YEARS OF CHRIST'S POWER

Part One: The Age of the Early Church Fathers

N. R. Needham

Grace Publications, 1998, £10

One rather obvious defect of most Protestantism is its lack of historical knowledge. Our church history starts with the Reformation; or with the Puritans or Methodists; or perhaps even with 1827 (the Plymouth Brethren), or 1900 (Pentecostalism). We may be aware of Athanasius, Augustine, Chrysostom, Jerome and Tertullian, but we have scarcely read any of their writings and may even dismiss the Fathers as “children!”

A more catholic view—using that term in the correct sense—will view the situation more widely and a covenantal one will look at the whole sweep of Bible history. But sadly the teaching given to most church members in most denominations is deplorable whether it be in Biblical knowledge, doctrine or history. In the main it is left to the individual to repair the defects in his education—and here comes along Dr. Nick Needham with this splendid book to help us.

The book sprang out of Dr. Needham's teaching at the Samuel Bill Theological College in Nigeria and seeks to bridge the gap between the academic and the popular and often inaccurate works which are the only alternative. A preliminary chapter on time helpfully sorts out the main misapprehensions of our dating system and is followed by Chapter 1 on the background of Rome and Israel. In the succeeding eleven chapters we are then led through the apostolic fathers and apologists; Gnostics, Catholics and Montanists; African Christianity; Arianism; Chrysostom, Jerome and Augustine; Chalcedon; the Monophysites and much, much more, ending up c. 700 AD.

Dr. Needham, like any good teacher, breaks his material down into bite-sized portions. The theological issues and persons are introduced

and their dates carefully given. Possible misunderstandings are noted and avoided. Even pronunciations of difficult words are given.

A particularly valuable feature of this book is the extracts from the more notable writers given at the end of each chapter. When one reads an old writer, e.g., John Owen, one comes to feel one knows him. These extracts perform a similar function. There is a searching piece by John Chrysostom, "Every Christian An Evangelist," on pages 256-257. I came prejudiced to Jerome on "The Blessedness of Virginity" but, although his exegesis is dubious one wryly recognises some of his examples!

So, if you do not know your Athanasius from your Augustine or are shaky on Vincent of Lerins; if you wonder where the creeds came from and cannot distinguish Apollinarianism from Eutychianism, or if you are doubtful about the title *theotokos* as a title for Mary, go out and get this book and read it.

Volume 2 on the Middle Ages is already available and carries the story forward to c. 1450, and Volume 3 on the Renaissance and the Reformation should appear later this year.

"The central current and ultimate aim of universal history is the Kingdom of God established by Jesus Christ. This is the grandest and most comprehensive institution in the world ... All other institutions are made subservient to it, and in its interest the whole world is governed. It is no afterthought of God, no subsequent emendation of the plan of creation, but it is the eternal forethought, the controlling idea, the beginning, the middle, and the end of all his ways and works." — *Philip Schaff*