

BOOK REVIEWS

Jared Ortiz and Daniel A. Keating, *The Nicene Creed: A Scriptural, Historical, and Theological Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024. 225pp. Paperback. \$24.99

The Nicene Creed is the most uniting doctrinal summary in the history of Christianity. Though debating aspects of meaning along the way, Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox all confess faith in the Triune God through this Creed as the baseline of biblical Christianity. This easy-to-follow and well-presented introduction to the Creed expounds the Triune God and his work of salvation in the church in light of Scripture, history, and theology, aiming at devotion. Saturated with Scripture and steeped in the church fathers, this volume usefully and charitably guides readers through core beliefs without which Christianity ceases to be. Unambiguously Roman Catholic in approach, Ortiz and Keating will leave Protestant (and Eastern Orthodox) readers behind at points while still presenting what every professing Christian must hold dear. After showing the plan and value of the book, this review will illustrate some tensions that a Protestant doctrine of salvation can help resolve.

The six chapters in the book are predictable but in a good and helpful way, following the order of the Creed. Throughout, the authors are sensitive to showing readers the original language of the 325 Creed and what changed in its final form in 381. They even include two appendices, enabling readers to track these changes in English, Greek, and Latin (211–15). Chapter one focuses on the phrase “I believe” (Latin) or “We believe” (Greek), indicating that the Creed is both a personal and corporate profession of faith. As faith is “a kind of light” through which we see invisible realities (18), so faith learns from another, while knowledge is learning for oneself (26). This distinction reflects the difference between walking by faith in God through his word now and walking by sight in glory (2Co 5:7). In chapter two, the authors treat God the Father and creation from nothing (*ex nihilo*), which is the essential fact about creation, resulting in a fundamental Creator/creature distinction. Evolution, in their view, remains an open question in Roman Catholic theology (62–63) so long as we retain the special creation of mankind in God’s image. Chapters three and four examine the divinity and humanity of the Son, asserting that the incarnation is “the great central truth of the Christian faith” (110). Because the Trinity precedes incarnation, this well-taken point could be an overstatement to a degree, though all Christians should admit that without God becoming man, mankind could never return to God.

In this section, and especially in the following chapter on the Holy Spirit, the authors show the nature of salvation in Christ along with Christology and Pneumatology. While maintaining that salvation comes through “Christ alone,” they explain that “the Catholic church teaches” that some who never

hear Christ's name can still be saved through him (139). They walk a fine line here, affirming no salvation outside of the Roman Catholic church but holding out hope for Eastern Orthodox and Protestant Christians, the latter of whom "have a real though imperfect communion with the church" (181) because they have the word and baptism. By contrast, building on texts like Romans 10:14–17, in which Christ's word is necessary for faith in Christ, Westminster Confession of Faith 10.4 asserts (strongly) that people can be saved in Christ without being called to him by word and Spirit is "very pernicious and to be detested." While readers might admire the charity Ortiz and Keating display here, removing the necessity of sound doctrine through the word in calling people to Christ ends up undercutting the urgent need for evangelism and compassion to the nations. If it is true that people are lost without Christ, and they only get Christ through the word, then implying that they can have him any other way becomes detestable because it endangers souls. Chapter six ("Life in the Trinity") is the most overtly Roman Catholic part of the book, defending Roman Catholic views of the church as "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic" in ways that exclude both Eastern and Orthodox and Protestant Christians from the church (though not necessarily from salvation!), inviting them to join in communion with the Triune God in the Roman Catholic church. That said, their emphasis on salvation as life in and with God, frequently citing 2 Peter 1:4 about partaking of the divine nature (e.g., 107, 140, 198, 210), reminds readers well that knowing God is eternal life (Jn 17:3). This is the point of the Creed since the "Amen" at the end reaffirms the "I believe" at the beginning (208).

Hopefully, without undercutting the authors' warm and generous tone, engaging some of their statements about the nature of salvation illustrates why differences persist, at least between Protestants and Roman Catholics. The order of salvation implicit in the book appears inconsistent and undoubtedly short of Scriptural teaching at key junctures. Baptism and regeneration help narrow down what I have in mind. For instance, "Faith saves us by engrafting us onto Christ through baptism" (20). This statement gets hard to piece together in light of what follows because baptism brings new birth and new life, yet it looks like faith here precedes baptism, uniting us to Christ, but somehow still through baptism. The question is whether faith unites to Christ, baptism, or both. Later, they add that faith comes through the Spirit through the Eucharist (90), seeming to make baptism the source of new birth, leading later to faith via another sacrament. Though the authors do not appeal overtly to Aquinas's distinction between unformed and formed faith (through love), this could offer a way out of this seeming dilemma by planting the seed of faith in baptism that needs to take shape and grow under the Eucharist. Though noting that the church is always a "mixed body," including true believers and hypocrites, they add, "Baptism sanctifies and justifies us" (192). However, "a baptism may be valid, but not fruitful" (195), meaning that some people are regenerate via baptism but do not bear fruit through faith, love, and hope. But baptism brings the

forgiveness of sins and “the new divine life” (199), and “eternal life begins now, in baptism” (206). In the end, baptism brings new birth, justification (forgiveness of sins here, 196) and sanctification, yet not all born-again people have faith and holiness; thus, they do not have salvation in Christ.

Acknowledging that most Christians have taught a form of baptismal regeneration in history, we must ask whether this presentation is coherent and Scriptural. One issue is what regeneration or new birth means and entails. Jesus says that only those born of “water and Spirit” can enter the kingdom of God (Jn 3:5). Yet 1 Peter 1:23 describes believers as being “born again, not of imperishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (ESV). Ordinarily, new birth happens through “the word of truth,” making believers “a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (Ja 1:18). The new birth has permanent consequences, according to Scripture: “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot keep sinning because he has been born of God” (1Jn 3:9). An unbreakable chain exists between new birth and new life, and this new life is always fruitful. New birth brings forgiveness of sins, as the authors agree, but also “a new heart” (Ez 36:26), which looks like God putting his “Spirit within you” (v. 27), leading to walking in his “statutes” and obeying his “rules.” Things get harder for the idea of regeneration through a baptism that is “not fruitful” when we see that Simon the Sorcerer was baptized in Acts 8:13, though his works showed that he was perishing (v. 20). Peter’s assessment was, “you have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God” (v. 21). If baptism brings regeneration, a new heart, justification, sanctification, and a changed life, then how can Simon be baptized, but not regenerated because he had no new heart, no fruit, and no life? Baptismal regeneration may be historical, but Ortiz and Keating illustrate why it quickly becomes incoherent in biblical terms.

Undoubtedly, baptism and regeneration are connected conceptually in Scripture, which space does not permit us to explore. However, Titus 3:4–7 gives a tighter order of salvation than the Roman Catholic one:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Salvation is not by our own works of righteousness but by faith in Christ without our works (Ro 3:28). We saw above that the Spirit calls us to new birth and union with Christ through the word. Baptism is a sign and seal of “the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.” It is an excellent vehicle to drive us to Christ without replacing either Christ’s work for us or

the Spirit's work in our hearts. Everyone who is regenerated and sanctified is justified and adopted, which is why all such people can never go on sinning as they did before. Roman Catholic theology results in a skewed order of salvation that is out of joint with Scripture. Simon had baptism, but Scripture says that he had none of the benefits listed by Peter and Paul. Though baptism can be valid without being fruitful, regeneration cannot be. Somewhat ironically, given that this is a book on the Nicene Creed, Trinitarian appropriations offer a corrective that looks much more like a Protestant gospel. From beginning to end, God saves us by sending his Spirit "through" Jesus Christ to regenerate, renew, justify, and adopt sinners in Christ. While baptized people can be hypocrites, regenerate people cannot be. Scripture and Roman Catholicism have very different views of what regeneration is and what it does.

If the authors of this book are openly Roman Catholic, seeking to win readers to their viewpoint, then this reviewer is also openly Protestant, seeking to win readers to his perspective. Readers should remember that soteriological differences between us build on the Trinity and Incarnation, without which salvation would be impossible. This book is a historically rich and biblically informed introduction to the Trinity and Incarnation. Debates over the nature of salvation are non-starters without starting here. Yet if Scripture is the word of God, on which point Protestants and Roman Catholics agree, then our views of the Spirit's application of Christ's work in salvation must harmonize with what the Triune God said and says through the Bible.

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