

Review of Thomas C. Oden's *Rebirth of Orthodoxy* by Jeff Peterson, Jack C. and Ruth Wright Associate Professor of New Testament, Austin Graduate School of Theology, Austin, Texas ([peterson@austingrad.edu](mailto:peterston@austingrad.edu)).

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Thomas Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (San Francisco et al.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003). ISBN 0-06-009785-X. Pp. xi + 212. \$24.95. 800-242-7737 or www.harpercollins.com.

The Campbells and other early Restoration leaders didn't set out to form a new church with its own distinctive practices; they wanted to transform Protestant Christianity in America and bring its divided sects together by making tests of fellowship only those observances that the New Testament clearly requires. They taught and wrote with a deep awareness of the whole American religious scene. For much of our history, however, Churches of Christ have turned our attention inward and had little interest in developments in other churches. In recent years, that situation has begun to change as our members have become involved in Young Life, Bible Study Fellowship, Promise Keepers, and other parachurch organizations and sometimes found more in common than we imagined.

Our reacquaintance with Christianity outside our fellowship has mostly been limited to evangelical believers. Thomas Oden, professor of theology and ethics at Drew University, surveys the wider religious landscape and finds many "signs of new life in Christianity" in a variety of communions as the twenty-first century opens. What Oden sees should be of interest and encouragement to all those holding the Restoration vision.

For many readers the most engaging way in to Oden's work will be through the account of his own pilgrimage (pp. 82–96). Oden grew up in a devout Methodist family

in southern Oklahoma. At college he became an agnostic, a socialist, and a pacifist. He pursued Methodist ordination and a Ph.D. in order to promote social and political revolution, and he notes interesting parallels with another “Methodist radical,” Hillary Rodham Clinton (pp. 84–85). The direction of his faith and life began to change when Will Herberg, a colleague at Drew University, told Oden that he must encounter the great minds of the Christian tradition if he wanted to avoid becoming “lost in supposed relevance” (p. 87); Herberg had made his own way back from Communism by reclaiming his Jewish identity in the great works of that tradition. Oden followed Herberg’s advice, read widely in ancient Christian writers, and came to profess “classic Christianity.” His religious journey has had social and political consequences. On one of the most divisive questions in American public life, for example, Oden now describes himself as “pro-choice before conception and pro-life thereafter” (p. 94).

Oden thinks that his journey is typical rather than unique, and he sees many today being drawn toward the same classic Christianity that he found in the writings of the eight ancient “doctors” (teachers) of the church: Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory the Great. The heart of his rediscovery is captured in one definition and two tables. The definition appears on p. 31: “Classic Christianity is most reliably defined textually by the New Testament itself. It is most *concisely* summed up in a primitive baptismal confession that was entirely derived from scripture as salvation history in a nutshell. This doctrinal core is recalled in the three prototype summaries of faith: the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the so-called Athanasian Creed (and their subsequent consensual confessions

and interpretations).” Alexander Campbell also found value in the ancient summaries of New Testament teaching, while objecting to their use as tests of fellowship.

The first table (pp. 56–57) contrasts the rediscovery of classic Christian orthodoxy (the “new ecumenism”) with the efforts of Protestant denominations to achieve greater institutional unity since 1948 (the “old ecumenism”). The old ecumenism was a top-down affair led by bureaucrats in denominational headquarters with little genuine effect; the new ecumenism results from members of many different churches rediscovering ancient Christian faith and holds much promise for greater unity in the faith to come. The second table (pp. 76–79) collects the “evidences of the rebirth of orthodoxy” discussed in chapters six through eleven (pp. 82–186). With this table Oden offers us a virtual “Who’s Who” in the rediscovery of classic Christianity and a valuable list of authors to cultivate.

Oden invites us to consider what we have in common with believers in the church’s first five centuries. We have sometimes supposed that the church fell into apostasy very soon after the apostolic age. Everett Ferguson has shown that the ancient church long remained committed to the teaching of the Scriptures, practiced believers’ baptism by immersion for forgiveness of sins, sang praises to God *a cappella*, observed communion on the first day of the week, and maintained aspects of congregational governance (*Early Christians Speak*, 2 vols., ACU Press, 1999–2002). Oden agrees that we deprive ourselves of valuable help in understanding the faith when we neglect the teachers of the ancient church.

Americans are pragmatic, and when we evaluate church life it is natural that our concerns are often practical: what will lead to growing rosters, a more energized membership, and more vibrant worship assemblies? These are important considerations,

but Tom Oden invites us to consider more basic questions: What is true? How can we best understand the faith once for all delivered to the saints? Who can teach us? Oden suggests that what ultimately “works” is fidelity to truth, and he introduces us to believers in many denominations who are seeking the truth and reaching answers that have much in common with the Restoration vision. *Chronicle* readers will find points of disagreement with Oden’s manifesto, but they may also find the argument more profitable than some that we have among ourselves.