A New Look at Historic Christianity

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Review of *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity* (1999), by Barry R. Bickmore.
This one thing at least is certain; whatever history teaches, whatever it omits, whatever it exaggerates or extenuates, whatever it says and unsays, at least the Christianity of history is not Protestantism. If ever there were a safe truth, it is this. . . . To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant.¹

The position, that historical Christianity is not Protestantism, is certainly true. . . . We maintain that Protestantism was the Christianity of the apostles—that very soon after their time, corruptions in doctrine and government were introduced into the church.²

Historians have given the name “Oxford Movement” to the unique activities of a group of scholars in England between 1833 and 1845—centered, of course, at Oxford University. A very


important outgrowth of this movement was a renaissance in the study of the early church fathers (i.e., patristics). Fueled in part by Newman’s *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, this renaissance quickly spread well beyond Oxford. It sparked interest within Roman Catholicism and many Protestant denominations.

J.-P. Migne produced his massive *Patrologiae Latinae* (221 volumes) and *Patrologiae Graecae* (162 volumes) between 1844 and 1866. Comprehensive English editions of the writings of the church fathers shortly followed Migne’s works.

Providential, it would seem, was the discovery of ancient documents that previously had existed either in fragments or were only known by name. These newly discovered documents included the Didache (1875), the Oxyrhynchus Papyri (1897), the Nag Hammadi Papyri (1945), and the Dead Sea Scrolls (1947). The emergence of these documents took patristic studies to a new level.

Unbeknownst to the scholars of Christendom, a new player would emerge on the scene of patristic studies: Hugh W. Nibley, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Gifted with a brilliant mind, Nibley has mastered Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, German, French, Spanish, Coptic, and Egyptian, giving him tools that very few possess to study patristics. Well before the translation and publication of many of these discoveries into English, Nibley started to write about them. He would lay the groundwork on which a future generation of Latter-day Saint scholars and writers would build.

One of these scholars is Barry Bickmore, who, in his newly published book, *Restoring the Ancient Church*, has added a significant work to the renaissance of patristic studies started in Oxford. It is my hope that I can offer a unique review of Bickmore’s book. I am not a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but I have been investigating the church since 1987. I also have a keen interest in patristics that started in 1980 with my purchase of the thirty-eight-volume *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. (My personal library has grown to more than fourteen thousand volumes, including more than sixteen hundred that are LDS-related.) I find it very interesting that Bickmore has organized and put into print many of the themes
that I have seen in my personal reading of the early church fathers. I find it equally interesting that anti-Mormons who compare LDS doctrines with those of the early church fathers either ignore or gloss over much of the evidence.

The cry I have read and heard over and over again from the anti-Mormon camp is that Mormonism is not “historic” or “orthodox” Christianity. But, as Newman pointed out in the above quotation, neither is Protestantism. My reading of the early church fathers has forced me to concur with Newman’s assessment. And yet Cunningham’s assessment of Roman Catholicism is equally telling, “Whatever be the Christianity of the New Testament, it is not Romanism. If ever there was a safe truth, it is this, and Romanism has ever felt it.”

These are frank admissions, ones that anti-Mormons ignore when they criticize the LDS Church. Enter Barry Bickmore’s book. Is there strong evidence that distinctive LDS doctrine had its counterpart in the early church? The honest investigator, after reading this book, must come to a positive conclusion.

In his preface Bickmore says, “I have endeavored to make this book exactly the kind of book I would like to have read when I first became interested in comparing Mormonism to early Christianity” (p. 15). Referring to previous LDS works on the subject, he says, “These [are] often quoted essentially from other LDS authors rather than from non-Mormon or even early Christian sources” (ibid.). (In a footnote he addresses some exceptions: Nibley’s writings, James Barker’s The Divine Church, and Michael Griffith’s books One Lord, One Faith and Signs of the True Church of Christ.) Bickmore then writes that his intention is “to fill the gap I perceive in the LDS literature” (ibid.). It is my opinion that Bickmore has accomplished what he set out to do.

Before presenting his evidences from the early church fathers, Bickmore lays down some very important assumptions—(1) that spiritual things cannot “be proven by human wisdom” (p. 16); (2) “Since we believe the post-apostolic Church had fallen away, we fully expect

3. Ibid., 48.
these documents to include views contrary to ours" (pp. 16-17n); (3) "we also expect that the earlier we go, the more true doctrine we are likely to find" (p. 17n); and (4) "Given the incomplete nature of the historical record . . . it would be fruitless to search the extant early Christian literature for data to 'falsify' LDS claims" (pp. 16-17). Bickmore ends his preface with "Those who reject these assumptions will no doubt find the arguments presented here less compelling, but even so I believe these arguments demonstrate conclusively that Mormonism is very similar in many respects to some very early forms of Christianity" (p. 17).

In the introduction of the book, Bickmore makes the following cogent remark: "If Joseph Smith taught doctrines that are in harmony with those of the early Church but which were essentially unknown in his time, the skeptic must provide explanation for the phenomenon" (p. 24). Those of us not belonging to the LDS Church need to keep this in mind when we look at Bickmore's evidence.

Chapter 2 addresses the issues of apostasy and restoration. The author begins this chapter by claiming, "The simple fact is that had there been no 'apostasy,' or 'falling away,' from Christ's original Church, there would have been no need for God to restore the Church" (p. 25).

Bickmore first presents Old and New Testament evidence that an apostasy would take place. On this he presents little new material; one can find most, if not all, of the verses used by Bickmore in other LDS books that deal with the apostasy. Yet this section is worth reading, for Bickmore's presentation of the material is clear and well-organized.

He then offers evidence from patristics and patristic scholars that treat the issue of apostasy. Though Nibley has given much of the same evidence in his past work, Bickmore's presentation is more up-to-date, and his citations are all from subsequent works written in English, allowing readers who have not mastered all the languages Nibley has (and I think that is most of us!) to check his references firsthand.

I found the citations from the Pastor of Hermas very interesting (see pp. 35-37). As Bickmore points out, the Pastor of Hermas was
considered for centuries to be inspired scripture by many Christians. In this work the church is represented in a vision as a tower being built; when it is finished, the end comes. To which is added, “But it will quickly be built up” (p. 36). The author of the Pastor of Hermas certainly does not envision a long future for Christ’s church.

Bickmore makes a small mistake when he writes, “it took fourteen ecumenical councils between the years 325 and 381 A.D. to settle the controversy about the doctrine of the Trinity” (p. 39). He is correct about the fourteen councils, but only two (Nicea in 325 and Constantinople in 381) are considered by historians to be “ecumenical.”

The section “Directions of Apostasy” (pp. 42–51) is a difficult one for me. Here, Bickmore provides his readers with only two quotations from the church fathers. Most of the information he gives to us in this section is from secondary sources, and most of these sources are very liberal. I am not saying that liberal sources cannot be useful, but I would certainly qualify the use of Harry Wolfson and Hans Jonas when dealing with Gnostic and Hellenistic influences on the early church fathers. These same authors propose that the New Testament writers were also influenced by the Gnostics and Hellenists.

Later, discussing spiritual gifts, Bickmore writes, “But what happened to the gifts? Few Christians today, besides some Pentecostals and charismatic Evangelicals, as well as the Mormons, claim to have all the gifts of the Spirit” (p. 52). As a non-Mormon, I would have to ask Bickmore what happened to the gifts that we see in 1 Corinthians 12–14. To date in my attendance at Latter-day Saint services, I have never seen the use of “tongues,” “prophecy,” nor “interpretations.” Let us keep in mind that one should not ask of others what oneself cannot provide.


In the section on "The Necessity of a Restoration" (see pp. 65-66), Bickmore makes an intriguing observation about the use of the phrase *all things* in Acts 3:20–21; 1 Peter 4:7; 2 Peter 1:3; and Matthew 17:11. He presents a solid argument that "all things" in the above contexts refers "to the pure gospel teaching."  

In addition to Bickmore's evidence on the apostasy, I would like to add an important quotation from the prominent Protestant theologian William Cunningham: "Protestants believe, as a matter of unquestionable historical certainty, that at a very early period error and corruption—i.e., deviations from the scriptural standard in matters of doctrine, government, worship, and discipline—manifested themselves in the visible church gradually, but rapidly; that this corruption deepened and increased, till it issued at length in a grand apostasy."  

Chapter 3 deals with the important issues of the doctrine of God and the nature of man. In this critical chapter, Bickmore points out that Jesus himself tells us, "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3).

Anti-Mormon critics are quick to accuse Latter-day Saints of teaching polytheism—they add that Trinitarianism is monotheistic. What they neglect to tell us is that Unitarians (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim) have leveled the same charge of polytheism against Trinitarians. Bickmore does a very good job in this chapter of addressing the complex issues pertaining to the doctrine of the Godhead. Although in my experience many Latter-day Saint writers have not been clear on this subject, Bickmore gives us an excellent presentation of the Godhead in LDS thought and then finds several parallels in early Christian writings.

After his brief, but accurate and clear, presentation of the Latter-day Saint doctrine of the Godhead and the classical Trinitarian view

6. Nibley makes the same observations in *Mormonism and Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 288–89.

(see pp. 76–82), Bickmore submits his evidence that a change had occurred in early Christian history from the God of the Bible, presented in anthropomorphic terms, to a God presented in Hellenistic philosophical terms. He also demonstrates that Hellenistic Christian philosophers and theologians such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Ambrose, and Augustine affirmed in their writings that many early Christians believed in a corporeal God, even though they themselves emphatically rejected such an idea:

Origen rejected anthropomorphism, not because the scriptures or unanimous Christian tradition specifically rejected it, but because the philosophers “despised” it: “The Jews indeed, but also some of our people, supposed that God should be understood as a man, that is, adorned with human members and human appearance. But the philosophers despise these stories as fabulous and formed in the likeness of poetic fictions.” (p. 90, emphasis added)

In the section entitled “The Problem of ‘Monotheism’” (pp. 106–21), Bickmore offers solid evidence that many of the early church fathers had no problem with identifying Jesus Christ as a second God. In addition to the fathers that Bickmore cites (Justin, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Origen, Novatian, Lactantius, Methodius, and Eusebius), we can add Gregory of Nyssa, who, although he had written a treatise called “On Not Three Gods,” was still able to write,

Does not the nature always remain undiminished in the case of every animal by the succession of its posterity? Further a man in begetting a man from himself does not divide his nature, but it remains in its fulness alike in him who begets and in him who is begotten, not split off and transferred from the one to the other, nor mutilated in the one when it is fully formed in the other, but at once existing in its entirety in the former and discoverable in its entirety in the latter.  

Further, “Accordingly, a man becomes ‘one’ with another, when in will, as our Lord says, they are ‘perfected into one’ (see Jn. 17:23), this union of wills being added to the connexion of nature. So also the Father and the Son are one, the community of nature and the community of will running, in them, into one.”

Following Gregory’s reasoning, just as it is proper to call the Saints “one,” and also “many,” so too with the Godhead. Gregory Nazianzen wrote, “When we look at the Godhead, or the First Cause, or the Monarchia, that which we conceive is One; but when we look at the Persons in Whom the Godhead dwells, and at Those Who timelessly and with equal glory have their Being from the First Cause—there are Three Whom we worship.” And again, “I will baptize you and make you a disciple in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; and These Three have One common name, the Godhead.”

Compare this with Orson Pratt, who said, “In one sense of the word, there are more Gods than one; and in another sense there is but one God,” and “there is but one God, and He is in all worlds, and throughout all space, wherever the same identical light or truth is found; and all beings, from all eternity to all eternity, have to worship... Him; though they worship Him in so many different tabernacles, yet it is the one God, or in other words, the same light or truth that is worshipped by all.”

Bickmore then cites Henry Bettenson, who says, “subordinationism... was pre-Nicene orthodoxy.” I fully concur with this assessment and will add that when one closely examines the doctrine of God and Jesus Christ in the early church fathers of the second and third centuries, one is hard pressed to find Trinitarianism—what one

9. Ibid., 1.34, in NPNF; 5:81.
11. Ibid., 40.45, in NPNF; 7:376.
13. Ibid., 2:346.
Bickmore, Restoring the Ancient Church (Waltz) • 173

does find is diversity. Note what R. P. C. Hanson has to say: “Finally, what is this Christian midrash [i.e., tradition]? What are its contents? The Gnostic formulae of Ignatius? The angel-Christology of Hermas? . . . or the economic Trinity of Irenaeus and of Tertullian? The modalistic monarchianism of Callistus and Zephyrinus? The graded Trinity of Origen?”15 And John Henry Newman writes,

If we limit our view of the teaching of the Fathers by what they expressly state, St. Ignatius may be considered as a Patripassian, St. Justin arianizes, and St. Hippolytus is a Photinian. . . . Tertullian is heterodox on the doctrine of our Lord’s divinity. . . . Origen is, at the very least, suspected, and must be defended and explained rather than cited as a witness of orthodoxy; and Eusebius was a Semi-Arian.16

Yet with all this diversity among the pre-Nicene, one point of theology remains constant: subordinationism.

Bickmore next provides his readers with a brief overview of the development of Christology and the doctrine of the Godhead from the time of the early apologists up to Augustine and Cyril of Jerusalem (see pp. 121–38). It is an adequate presentation, given the scope and limitations of the book’s format. (The reader should note that this is a very complex issue on which hundreds of volumes have been written.)

The following section, “The Origin and Destiny of Man” (pp. 138–59), defines the Latter-day Saint view of the doctrine of premortal existence; there Bickmore gives us a few examples of church fathers who supported this view. Although definitely a minority view among the early church fathers, some certainly held to it; as Bickmore points out, the doctrine of premortal existence was not “formally condemned until 543 A.D. when Origen’s ‘errors’ were listed and pronounced heretical at a council of bishops” (p. 145).

Next Bickmore discusses the doctrine of deification (i.e., man becoming God). After a brief presentation of the LDS view, Bickmore

turns to the writings of the church fathers. Before proceeding, I must say that, as one who is not LDS, I have been somewhat troubled by the immense number of passages in the church fathers that promote the doctrine of deification. As Bickmore points out, the later fathers began to qualify what deification meant or did not mean, but the vast majority of the pre-Nicene fathers established no guidelines on the matter for their readers.17

Bickmore gives his readers more than twenty citations from the church fathers that teach the doctrine that men can become gods. To this number I could add at least another thirty quotations from my personal notes on the church fathers that teach the same doctrine. I think the citations speak for themselves, but read what one Protestant scholar had to say: "Participation in God was carried so far by Irenaeus as to amount to deification. 'We were not made gods in the beginning,' he says, 'but at first men, then at length gods.' This is not to be understood as mere rhetorical exaggeration on Irenaeus' part. He meant the statement to be taken literally."18 This is food for thought; unless one is willing to completely ignore and discard the unified teaching of the early church fathers on the doctrine of deification, the honest reader must seriously look at either the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or the Eastern Orthodox Church as maintaining the truly "historic" teaching on this important doctrine.

In chapter 4, "Salvation: History and Requirements," Bickmore discusses Adam and the fall, the sinful nature of man, original sin, and "total depravity" and predestination (see pp. 168–86). He provides examples from the church fathers that are very close to Latter-day Saint teachings on these subjects.

Bickmore also touches on faith, grace, and works (see pp. 191–96). I wish he would have devoted more space to these complex doctrines, but then we must keep in mind that Catholics and Protestants have been hotly debating these doctrines for more than four hundred

years now, and agreement is nowhere in sight. Bickmore demonstrates that the LDS position certainly falls within the "historic" teachings on these doctrines.

Pages 197–204 deal with baptism and the laying on of hands, once again two doctrines hotly debated among Christians. Bickmore clearly shows that the LDS view on these issues was represented by some of the early church fathers.

Bickmore then delves into the topic of the spirit world, the world of the departed dead (see pp. 205–18). Latter-day Saint teachings that are reflected in the writings of the early church fathers include a twofold division of the spirit world, instruction in paradise, punishment for most of the wicked, and a preaching of the gospel in spirit prison.

To my knowledge, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the only body of Christian believers who currently practice baptism for the dead (see pp. 218–27). Baptism for the dead is, of course, mentioned once in the Bible, in 1 Corinthians 15:29. Bickmore cites Richard DeMaris, who explains the problem with that biblical passage: "The reference itself is simply so obscure and our knowledge so limited that we cannot discern just what this rite actually involved or meant."19 Moving on to the church fathers, Bickmore informs us that "The index of texts for ANF [Ante-Nicene Fathers] lists only two instances in the entire pre-Nicene period where 1 Corinthians 15:29 was even mentioned" (p. 223 n. 160). He adds, "Aside from Paul's reference there is only mention of a few heretical groups who preserved the practice" (p. 222).

In attempting to lend support for the practice of baptism for the dead, Bickmore cites an obscure passage from the Pastor of Hermas that seems to indicate that baptism for the righteous dead is practiced in some form in heaven. In his search for support among the church fathers, Bickmore even goes so far as to quote Clement of

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Alexandria out of context, “‘They went down therefore into the water and again ascended. . . . But those who had fallen asleep descended dead, but ascended alive. . . .’ Then, too, the more subtle substance, the soul, could never receive any injury from the grosser element of water” (p. 221). The footnote for this quotation tells us that the passage is from Clement’s Stromata 6.6 (see p. 221 n. 153). What Bickmore neglects to tell his readers is that the portion of the quotation following the second set of ellipsis points is six paragraphs away. The following is the greater context of the above citation:

If, then, He preached only to the Jews, who wanted the knowledge and faith of the Saviour, it is plain that, since God is no respecter of persons, the apostles also, as here, so there, preached the Gospel to those of the heathen who were ready for conversion. And it is well said by the Shepherd, “They went down with them therefore into the water, and again ascended. But these descended alive, and again ascended alive. But those who had fallen asleep, descended dead, but ascended alive.” Further, the Gospel says, “that many bodies of those that slept arose,”—plainly as having been translated to a better state. There took place, then, a universal movement and translation through the economy of the Saviour.20 . . .

If, then, in the deluge all sinful flesh perished, punishment having been inflicted on them for correction, we must first believe that the will of God, which is disciplinary and beneficent, saves those who turn to Him. Then, too, the more subtle substance, the soul, could never receive any injury from the grosser element of water, its subtle and simple nature rendering it impalpable, called as it is incorporeal. But whatever is gross, made so in consequence of sin, this is cast away along with the carnal spirit which lusts against the soul.21

21. Ibid., 6.6.12, in ANF, 2:492.
In an attempt to explain away the lack of reference to baptism for the dead in the writings of the early church fathers, Bickmore suggests that the practice was a secret, esoteric one. He writes, "All the sacraments of the Church were veiled in secrecy until the third century. According to Davies, in the first two centuries of Christianity there are plenty of references to baptism and the Eucharist, but no detailed descriptions, because 'the observance of the disciplina arcani [secret discipline] inhibited full descriptions of these rites'" (p. 225).\(^{22}\)

It is extremely important to note that the scholarship of Hanson contradicts the notion that secret tradition existed among the orthodox fathers of the early church.\(^{23}\) Hanson informs us, "Secret tradition is characteristic of Gnosticism and not of orthodox Christianity."\(^{24}\) He tells us that the term disciplina arcani was first coined in the seventeenth century by Jean Daillé, who used the term to describe the alleged practice of concealing the doctrines and rites of Christianity. Hanson continues,

This hypothesis used to be widely employed by apologists for orthodoxy, as a means of accounting for the apparent ignorance on the part of early Christian writers of doctrines developed in the fourth and later centuries. Newman, for instance, applies it frequently in his Arians of the Fourth Century. But this method of accounting for the development of Christian doctrine has now been everywhere abandoned. Indeed, Newman himself had abandoned it by the time he came to write his Development of Christian Doctrine.\(^{25}\)

I am surprised that Bickmore attempts to use the argument of disciplina arcani, for Hanson puts to rest any legitimate attempt to appeal to its use. Bickmore must be familiar with this book, for he cites it on page 301.

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23. See Hanson, Tradition in the Early Church, 27–35.
24. Ibid., 27.
25. Ibid.
To sum up, the evidence for baptism of the dead as a practice among members of the orthodox, early church is not convincing. It was practiced in some heretical Christian sects, but I am not comfortable with using Gnostic heretical practices to support true Christian doctrine. It is, of course, mentioned in the New Testament, but only once. It must be admitted that New Testament scholars have not come up with any type of consensus as to what Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 15:29, so the LDS interpretation cannot be ruled out simply by exegesis. But we are left with the question of why it was not practiced in (or even mentioned in the writings of) the early church. A plausible argument from the Latter-day Saint perspective could be that it was a practice primarily reserved for the latter-day dispensation and that Christ and his apostles revealed the doctrine to very few in the early church. In conjunction with this line of thought, early abuses by those few to whom the doctrine had been revealed may have caused the apostles to cease any practice of it. But, that said, to the non-Mormon, the practice of baptism for the dead rests on very scanty ancient evidence.

Bickmore’s next chapter, “Church Organization and Life” (see pp. 251–81), touches on priesthood authority; the “priesthood of all believers”; the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods; offices in the priesthood; the Lord’s Day; worship; the Lord’s supper; anointing the sick; and tithes, offerings, and the United Order. He does a good job in the brief space of thirty pages to document support in the early church for most of the above practices and beliefs that exist in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. If there is one weakness in his treatment, it lies in finding support for the continuance of the Aaronic Priesthood. He clarifies, “As for the offices of the Aaronic priesthood, only deacons are mentioned in the New Testament Church” (p. 267). Bickmore gives us no solid evidence from the church fathers that the office of deacon was an office in the Aaronic Priesthood. In fact, apart from suggesting that converted Jewish priests did not lose their authority as Aaronic priests, Bickmore gives us no evidence that the Aaronic Priesthood continued within the Christian church.
In chapter 6, "The Temple," Bickmore attempts to demonstrate to his readers that secret and esoteric doctrines existed in the early church from the New Testament period onward. At first reading, Bickmore seems to have compiled strong evidence for the existence of such doctrines. However, I must once again refer readers to Hanson's work, Tradition in the Early Church. Although a complex issue, in my opinion Hanson has put to rest the theory that an oral, secret, apostolic tradition existed in the early Christian church. It would take me too many pages to present all the evidence cogently, so I will simply recommend Hanson's book to anyone interested in the subject.

Bickmore's final chapter, "Conclusions," is a mere page-and-a-half long. He writes,

Latter-day Saints believe that much of the New Testament church, with its basic doctrines and ordinances, forms the fabric of most modern Christian churches, but they also hold that "many plain and precious" things have been lost or changed over the two centuries since Christ was crucified and the church fell into apostasy. Latter-day Saints claim that those lost or altered elements were restored by God in these latter days through the Prophet Joseph Smith. (p. 353)

This, of course, is the most important issue that divides the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from all other Christian churches. Bickmore has certainly demonstrated that many teachings of the LDS Church were present in writings of the early church fathers. Some of the evidence that Bickmore has presented is from confessedly heretical groups, but the majority has been gleaned from what most would call the "orthodox" fathers. Bickmore's claim that "the Church which Joseph Smith claims to have restored is much closer to the original church of Christ, as revealed in the many documents of the first three centuries after Christ" (p. 354) would be contested by Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant scholars, but the fact remains that Latter-day Saint scholars can appeal to the early church fathers for support on many of their doctrines. Just as Catholics,
Orthodox, Protestants, and Latter-day Saints disagree over what the Bible teaches, so too, as one should expect, they will disagree over what the church fathers taught. Luther and Calvin felt that the early fathers gave more support to their teachings than to those of the Catholic Church. Now Bickmore and other Latter-day Saint writers believe that the early fathers lend more support to LDS teachings than to any other church's.

So, who is correct? We will have to decide for ourselves through diligent prayer and study. If there is one thing that all mankind can count on it is this—if we are diligent and faithful in our search for truth, God will be faithful in revealing it. God’s timing may not coincide with what we expect or desire, but the confirmation will come.

It is my sincere hope that Bickmore’s book will encourage all Christians to study the early church fathers, along with the scriptures, and that cogent discussion will continue among those who take up this noble pursuit.