

Booknotes by Guy M. Williams
Christianity's Family Tree: What Other Christians Believe and Why
By Adam Hamilton

Christianity's Family Tree: What Other Christians Believe and Why
Adam Hamilton
2007 Abingdon Press
133 pages

"Imagine yourself walking into a big family reunion." Adam Hamilton sets the stage and tone for his book, *Christianity's Family Tree: What Other Christians Believe and Why*, with this introductory sentence and image of family. We know this will be an appreciative and warm volume, exploring the various branches with honesty and generosity in tandem. That is just what I found in reading it. Hamilton makes clear that his point is not to critique other branches of Christianity nor to defend Methodism against their inherent critiques of his own denomination and tradition. Rather, he is looking for lessons to learn from others. Hamilton is first and foremost a pastor, concerned about guiding his people into a deeper relationship with God. And while truth-telling is virtuous, so is a generous spirit that adopts a posture of humility and learning rather than arrogance and defensiveness.

This book grew out of a series of sermons Adam Hamilton preached at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, where he is senior pastor. Though there are plenty of movements that could have been included, Hamilton does examine the most prominent theological traditions within the Christian faith: Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Lutheranism, Presbyterianism, Anglicanism, Baptists, Pentecostalism, and lastly, Methodism. The chapters correspond more or less with the historical development of Christianity. Orthodoxy is first, rather than Catholicism, both because it claims to be the oldest expression of Christianity and because the organization of the book flows more neatly and intuitively as the various Protestant expressions immediately follow Catholicism. Also, Methodism is last (though Pentecostalism is younger) because he is a United Methodist pastor writing primarily for United Methodists. Placing the chapter on Methodism last allows the primary audience to have given a hearing to all the others before considering its own tradition, thus enabling a better conversation in the mind of the reader. And Methodism is cast (appropriately so, I think) as holding together many of the characteristics of the other traditions (along this particular theme, see also Paul Wesley Chilcote's *Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision: An Introduction to the Faith of John and Charles Wesley*, and Bishop Scott J. Jones's *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center*).

Interviews with local representatives of the other Christian traditions from Hamilton's Kansas City area add to the appreciative tone of the book. And each chapter includes a diagram of how each tradition understands the flow of church history. The knowledgeable reader will recognize many episodes are glossed over in the lives of the key persons identified and associated with each movement. Given his aim for the book, Hamilton's decisions regarding how to edit the founders' biographies are generally well made. An annotated bibliography lists a handful of books for further reading--one for each tradition and a couple of accessible books on church history and on religion in America. In addition to personal reading, a curriculum supplement in the form of a leader's guide and a DVD is available for group study.

Another helpful feature of the book is Hamilton's highlighting a few characteristics of each tradition's theology and/or practice that he appreciates personally and commends to others. The practical application begun by that aspect of each chapter would have been enhanced by two or three reflection questions at the end of each chapter, joined by sample practices

that could (a) incorporate the contributions of that tradition into one's devotional life and discipleship and/or (b) nurture appreciation for that tradition's contribution to Christianity.

Hamilton writes in his usual easy-reading style that displays a gift for presenting weighty content with simple clarity. This is built upon good judgment concerning what to include and what to leave out, a skill that serves him well in a book that necessitates overviews of church history in each chapter.

Christianity's Family Tree is well worth the read both for its informative overview of church history, and for its uplifting tone that invites greater engagement with one's own tradition while inspiring greater appreciation and respect for the traditions of others.

Consider:

1. What is your basic opinion about other Christian denominations and traditions?
2. Do you have a basic understanding of the Christian heritage?
3. What benefits would you receive from understanding your own tradition in light of other traditions?