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# BULLETIN

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us to salvation and sanctification in the Holy Spirit (2 Thess. 2:12-15). But for Paul this truth is a story (God-spell) about a Person, not a set of inerrant propositions. We fundamentally believe in Jesus Christ, not in a set of propositions. While belief in Jesus surely implies belief in certain propositions (i.e., that Jesus lived, taught, died, rose, etc.) *this is clearly secondary*. The foundational belief in the New Testament is always a belief "in," not a belief "that"; or, better, our belief "in" (personal trust) leads us to certain beliefs "that" (beliefs about certain propositions). Henry is aware of this and tries to deal with it (3:433), but the attempt only reveals the depth of his onesidedness.

We need not follow Henry in order to believe in objective, divine truth. Objectivity can be maintained in an eternal Person, the Living Word, as much as in a set of eternal, inerrant propositions (as T. F. Torrance has clearly shown in his many writings). Indeed, Henry's way of salvation owes far more to Plato and Aristotle than it does to Jesus. Henry confesses that belief in Jesus is "a kind of literary shorthand" (3:438) for belief in propositions! This can only lead to the idea of salvation-by-knowledge, a return to Gnosticism (not a secret gnosis, but a gnosis none the less!). Henry's dialogue with Torrance (3:216-229) discloses the weakness of his own position; his withholding of the name "evangelical" from Torrance is sheer prejudice. Thesis six claims that revelation is personal, but this boils down to the idea that God reveals his Names in the propositions of the Bible. This is *personal* self-revelation?

Another major problem with Henry's *summa* is that he has declined to see significant value in much of modern thought. This arises from his theological method. Henry's approach is what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls "foundationalism" (see his *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed., 1984). Wolter-

storff, Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, and other evangelical philosophers have rightly rejected foundationalism, as did C. S. Peirce and J. H. Newman in the previous century. There is no pure Cartesian set of indubitable propositions from which we can derive philosophy and theology. Against Henry, I must insist that the Bible cannot be a foundation of inerrant propositions, upon which we build the edifice of theology. Henry has chosen not to draw upon the insights of modern philosophy, and his theology is based on this questionable theological method. If, as he claims, the Bible is the set of foundational, inerrant propositions, then all we need to do is arrange these propositions in systematic order, criticize other positions, and we have pure, timeless truth. Theology just doesn't work that way! Henry's theological method neither fits the phenomena of Scripture nor performs the actual task of philosophy and theology. (For a much better view, still upholding inerrancy, see Clark Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*, reviewed elsewhere in this issue.)

In one important area especially—hermeneutics—Henry has failed to learn from modern thought. His view of interpretation can only be described as naive. He has read widely in this field, and as usual summarizes important books, but only to reject them (4:296-315). He insists that "revelation has a propositional-verbal character and can be directly extracted [!] from the scriptural text. . . . The Bible is a book of divinely disclosed doctrinal truths comprehensible to any reader" (4:300). According to Henry, exegesis presupposes a fixed methodology and is a scientific quest for objective and permanent knowledge (4:304). This view cannot stand up against the facts of science and Scripture. Kurt Godel in mathematics and Werner Heisenberg in physics *proved* that there is no objective knowledge of the sort Henry is looking for. In philosophy of science, M. Po-

lanyi and T. Kuhn both clearly demonstrate that science is not "objective" in the sense of personal prejudice and interest playing no part in scientific discovery. The fact is that we cannot escape our life situation and our personal interests in order to obtain pure, timeless truths. Henry is dreaming the impossible dream.

On the other hand, I must commend Henry for his cautious acceptance in volume four of the historical-critical method. He rightly accepts form-criticism, for example (4:81f.) while rejecting conclusions based on false presuppositions. Henry takes Harold Lindell to task for the latter's anti-intellectualism in rejecting the historical-critical method (4:393). He plainly states that "historical criticism is never philosophically or theologically neutral" (4:403). One only wishes he had come to this conclusion in his discussion of hermeneutics!

All in all, I feel Henry has done evangelicalism both good and harm in this *summa*. The good comes from his clear placing of evangelical options in the mainstream of current theology. Though some may ignore his work, they cannot claim that evangelical theology has not been ably articulated. On the other hand, Henry has harmed evangelical theology by his uncritical acceptance of the philosophy of Gordon H. Clark. This philosophy is simply not viable and will give some a poor excuse to reject Henry's theology out of hand. It also leads to a *summa* in which page after page is spent discussing the views of other scholars, only to reject them in the end. Henry places himself in a lonely corner, where just a handful of conservative theologians are willing even to dialogue with him. He has failed to profit from modern thought, and therefore has failed to write the modern exposition (not just *defense!*) of evangelical theology we so desperately need.

## Erickson's Three-Volume *Magnum Opus*

by Clark H. Pinnock

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### *Christian Theology*

by Millard J. Erickson (Baker Book House, 3 vols., 1983, 1984, 1985, 1274 pp., \$57.85).

Millard Erickson is now dean of Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, and has labored for two decades to write a major systematic theology which would replace A. H. Strong in the teaching of ministerial students. This he has accomplished with great distinction, and has given to all of us a lucidly written and carefully organized evangelical theology. I do not think one has to be Baptist to recognize that here is the basic level textbook in Christian doctrine we have been needing for some time. It is quality work from first to last. Erickson is current in biblical studies, historical theology, and philosophical issues,

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and presents the fruits of his considerable labors to us in an eminently readable and edifying form. Almost wherever you look in the vast extent of this *magnum opus* you discover wise teaching on the major issues confronting our theological convictions today. And the preacher will find here the material for a lifetime of pulpit work. I am frankly filled with delight when I contemplate this magnificent production.

One can tell something about this work by noting the people to whom Erickson dedicates each of the three volumes: to Bernard Ramm his first theology professor, to William Hordern his doctoral mentor, and to Wolfhart Pannenberg who has been an inspiration to him. Ramm symbolizes the solid evangelical setting in which Erickson lives and works. Hordern represents the larger realm of theological thought adjacent to it. And Pannenberg stands for the high level of reflection which Erickson wants to engage in. Because

he has incorporated the wealth of theological investigation from beyond his own confessional circles, Erickson has been able to create the masterpiece he has. Here is an evangelical theologian who has grown up in the family of conservative theology and not forsaken it, but has also moved beyond its confines in his search for good ideas. He has been able to integrate these insights into a framework which respects the authority of the Bible, employing them in the service of an evangelical witness and piety.

The way the author proceeds will not surprise anyone, though it does raise a question. He begins, after clearing up some preliminary matters, by exploring the issue of how we know God. He goes into general and then special revelation, and makes the case for Scripture as a product of the latter and the touchstone of authority in theology. On the basis of the canonical principle he then advances to an exposition of all the various top-

ics familiar to systematic theology, based upon the data Scripture affords. But is it proper to start with the Bible rather than the gospel? If the gospel is the heart of Scripture, should we not start with it? Is this gospel true because the Bible happens to teach it, or does the Bible derive its authority from the good news? I am asking the Lutheran question: should not a systematic theology begin with the good news even though, admittedly, it must move swiftly to "what preaches Christ"? How evangelical is it to start with something other than the evangel?

What Erickson actually does start with is the presupposition of God revealing himself in the Bible (p. 33). "From this basic postulate we may proceed to elaborate an entire theological system by unfolding the contents of the Scriptures." He seems to rest the issue of validation, not upon the narrative of the gospel, but upon verbal revelation as a kind of rational axiom. And like a true rationalist he does not want to allow for much of a role for natural theology which would depend precariously upon empirical factors. Erickson, then, can be placed in the rationalist tradition in evangelicalism typified by E. J. Carnell, Gordon Clark, and Carl Henry. For reasons of apologetics he does not begin with the gospel but with the axiom of verbal revelation. In this, Christian theology would not differ essentially from Islamic theology. I cannot help but sense there is something wrong about this state of affairs. Do we really wish to compare sacred books with the Muslim, or to contrast good news with bad news?

On the doctrine of Scripture, Erickson plays it safe and espouses inerrancy, even though he provides plenty of reasons why someone might not want to do so. I say he plays it safe because everyone knows inerrancy is the word one has to use if one hopes to abide comfortably in the evangelical camp these days. And why not? Inerrancy is a word with no precise meaning; so if it is the password for getting safely past the sentries, why not use it? It frees one to do his work in relative peace without fear of attack.

Erickson's theology stands in the Calvinistic Baptist tradition as Strong's did. Given the elite status which Calvinism enjoys in the evangelical establishment, this ensures wide acceptance. In fact, of course, Erickson's Calvinism is very diluted. He admits, in a discussion of God's plan, that some Calvinists would not recognize what he is proposing to be Calvinistic at all (p. 359). For my part, I do not doubt that Erickson remains in the truly Reformed camp. My problem with it is a matter of whether what he says is coherent. How can God be said to be in control of everything in a determinist sense and not be identified as the author of sin? Throwing in a little Arminian talk at key points softens the impression, but does nothing to promote understanding. I am glad to hear Erickson say God "permits" sin and calls us into a partnership with himself. Yet for the life of me I cannot see what these sentiments have to do with Calvinism or how they fit in with it. In a discussion of the extent of Christ's atonement, for example, Erickson is treading on Arminian ground. He says that the atone-

ment is universal and applies to all sinners, and then explains why all are not saved: "There is the possibility that someone for whom salvation is available may fail to accept it" (p. 835). Again, Erickson refers to this idea as the most diluted form of Calvinism. Indeed, it is so diluted that one could easily declare himself Arminian and say such things with greater conviction and coherence. But let me add that, if he were inclined to do so, one would also incur displeasure from the evangelical establishment which requires its theology at least to appear Calvinistic, even if considerably diluted. Examine, for instance, *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter Elwell, and see if you can find a single article bearing upon any topic of interest to Calvinism which was not written by a Calvinist. Certainly Erickson is wise to appear at times to be Arminian but at no time actually to be so.

But there is a side to Reformed theology not well represented in this work or in much of the evangelicalism it comes out of. I am referring to its culture-building social dimension. From Calvin came the powerful Christ the Transformer motif which has become so influential in the ecumenical church of today. Calvin believed that God wanted to take dominion again over his fallen creation, and expected his people to implement his statutes in society whenever they could. On the basis of this idea Geneva itself was governed, and from it sprang the Puritan political theology which bore fruit in England and in New England. Indeed, it would be hard to deny that the Catholics, the Lutherans, and practically all others have taken over this culture-transforming vision from Calvin and made it their own—all others, that is, except a large body of pre-millennial, heavily baptistic evangelicals who continue to define salvation in narrowly individualistic terms and do not expect God to use Christians to change the face of human culture in this age.

Having blamed Erickson for being too Calvinistic in theology proper, I now object to his not being Calvinistic enough when it comes to the holistic scope of salvation. He narrows down the atonement to penal substitution (p. 815) and discusses the nature of salvation in very nearly exclusively individualistic terms (Part 10). He even says, "Jesus made it clear that the eternal spiritual welfare of the individual is infinitely more important than the supplying of temporal needs" (p. 905). Is this perhaps the reason why the kingdom of God as a topic is not treated either under Christology or under salvation? Is it any wonder that forty million American evangelicals have been unable to impart to the public square a tangy Christian flavor? How could they if they have no hope for culture except to be taken out of it by our returning Lord Jesus?

Fortunately, large numbers of evangelicals today do not live by the theology which they believe and Erickson presents, and they are beginning to move out to reclaim before it is too late (if it is not already too late) areas of Christian influence in society. But sooner or later we will need an evangelical systematic theology which will legitimate rather than

discourage the work of culture reclamation we are already starting to engage in. I do not think liberation theology has much to offer, since it is in the last analysis a thinly disguised religious version of Marxist politics. I think we are going to need the old Calvinistic eschatology called post-millennialism. This is the hope which places victory rather than defeat before our eyes.

This is the evangelical systematic theology we need to have at hand. It covers so many topics so well and supplies the foundations so generously. I think we have to go beyond it in a number of ways, but it informs the discussion richly and sets up a marvelous base camp from which to climb higher. Many of us will be enabled to scale further heights in evangelical theology only because Erickson labored so diligently to attain the high level of theological understanding evident in this fine set.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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*History and Historical Understanding*  
edited by C. T. McIntire and Ronald A. Wells (Eerdmans, 1984, 144 pp., \$6.95). Reviewed by Brother Jeffrey Gros, F.S.C., Director of the Commission on Faith and Order, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.

This study of history and historians by eight well known authors, four of them teaching at Calvin College, is a welcome addition to the literature. Not only is it helpful to bring the Gospel alive from its historical sources for historians and biblical scholars, but also for teachers of Christianity and the sophisticated general reader.

The diversity of points of view among the authors provide a very enriched understanding, ranging from Langdon Gilkey's essay on meaning to Swieringa's apologetic for using scientific resources in history. Of course, as in any anthology, the varieties of style make for very different levels of interest for diverse readers. However, Marty's discussion of the difference that Christianity makes to the historian, the contribution that history can make to the believer, and the historian's vocation provides stimulating spiritual reading for any Christian scholar. Likewise, Marsden's discussion of the question of common sense and Baconian science, as it relates to subjectivism, interpretation and theory, is a helpful analysis not only for the background of the historian but also for the biblical scholar. Rienstra's essay on objectivity and the tensions involved lay open many of the epistemological tensions inherent in the historical process. One will find Handy's essay on how history is to serve the present as its cultural memory and on the tensions between history and faith to be an enlivening contribution.

The final essay draws on data by Van Kely. It relies on methodologies developed around the interpretation of the French Revolution, but has implementations for the hermeneutics of history in a wider context. Indeed, the McIntyre article verges on a metaphysical theory as he discusses the question of the