

BOOK REVIEWS

WHO NEEDS THEOLOGY? An Invitation to the Study of God

by Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olsen

Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1996

Who Needs Theology? is a useful and accessible introduction to the nature and study of theology. It explains the importance of a reflective theology in the life of the church, responds to some frequent misgivings about the discipline of theology, and discusses some of the presuppositions that underlie it. At £8.99 it is however very highly priced for a relatively lightweight book of only 150 pages.

The starting point of the authors' discussion is contained in the title of the first chapter, 'Everyone is a theologian'. They point out that the question is not whether one should be a theologian or not, for everybody is a theologian of some sort since everybody is concerned about life's basic questions. The issue is rather whether one's theology is soundly based or not: are we good theologians or poor ones? This leads on to a consideration of different levels of theology, and a rejection on the one hand of 'folk theology', the unreflecting and simplistic adherence to certain beliefs for subjective or pragmatic reasons, and on the other of the highly speculative and philosophical academic theology which is often quite divorced from the needs of the church in the real world. The authors' concern is that all Christians should actively reflect on their beliefs; the role of the professional theologian, engaged in teaching and research, is to help them in that task so that their lives might be grounded in truth.

In chapter 3 the authors offer their definition of theology: 'Christian theology is reflecting on and articulating the God-centred life and beliefs that Christians share as followers of Jesus Christ, and it is done in order that God may be glorified in all Christians say and do'. In the following chapter they respond to a number of common objections to theology. The answers they give are helpful but, while they do accept that not all theology is good, they fail here and throughout the book adequately to consider the destructive consequences for the church and for individual Christians of the propagation of erroneous theology.

Chapter 5 considers what the authors identify as the two tasks of theology. It has the *critical* functions of examining the truths of beliefs held in the church, and of evaluating the relative importance of different Christian beliefs. It has also the *constructive* task 'to set forth the unity and coherence' of biblical teachings. In the course of the discussion the authors make the interesting point that the theologians of the early church were mostly church leaders. It was during the high middle ages that the universities began to produce professional theologians who were not church leaders, which has become much more the norm in the modern age. It would have been helpful if they had explored the implications, and desirability, of this change both for theology itself and for the life of the church. A too brief discussion of the different theological traditions concludes the chapter.

It is with their discussion of the tools of the theologian, and specifically of the role of the Bible in theology, that the book provokes some serious misgivings. Thus Grenz and Olsen declare, 'Nearly all Christian churches today take seriously the great Reformation hallmark, *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone").' But is this really the case? The declaration certainly needs substantiation for it is not self-evidently true, and it may indeed be that in making it the authors do not understand 'the great Reformation hallmark, *sola scriptura*' in the same way that the Reformers understood it themselves. They go on to say that there is no need to "prove" the Bible to establish its role in theology. Because the Bible is the universally acknowledged book of the Christian church - the foundational document of the faith community - it is the norm for our theological reflections.' They appear to be saying that the Bible is normative for theology because it is universally acknowledged to be so (presumably by the church, although this is itself questionable), rather than establishing its authority on the grounds that it is God's own unique Word. Indeed they define it rather vaguely as 'the vision of what it means to be God's people throughout Scripture', and a reference to *ongoing* revelation ('throughout history God has revealed - and is revealing - the divine nature and divine intentions') appears effectively to undermine its uniqueness. Despite their insistence on its normative role in theology their exact understanding of the Bible's essential character does not emerge clearly from their discussion.

Chapter 7 discusses the importance of the context in which theology is constructed and makes a number of significant points about the need to express theology in terms appropriate to the context of the theologian and those he addresses, while also recognising the danger of a theology shaped by purely cultural considerations. However the authors are unduly pessimistic when they assert that 'the search for the one biblical system of doctrine is a mirage', continuing a little further on, 'the discovery of some supposedly biblical system

of doctrine is too precise'. Such an approach leads finally in the direction of a pluralistic theological relativism, as is implied by the example they cite. They refer to the different interpretations of the doctrine of the atonement through history: the ransom theory, the satisfaction theory, the penal-substitution theory and the moral-influence theory. They reject the idea that any one of them is correct: 'we can only speak of the correctness of each theory as an expression of the gospel that speaks within a specific cultural situation. The truth of each is in part determined by the context to which it seeks to bear the biblical message.' However, while cultural factors may indeed have influenced the development of each of these different approaches, this does not mean that all are equally valid or satisfactory interpretations of biblical teaching. The truth of any interpretation is ultimately determined not by its appropriateness to the context being addressed but by the degree to which it accurately represents the Bible's own priorities and emphases.

The final chapters stress the importance of the relationship between theology and Christian living, and call upon the readers to engage in theological reflection themselves. Among other useful points made here, the authors stress that the Christian theologian must want to know God rather than just to know about him. It is a vital point and might have been pursued further. There is nothing more crucial than to know God and, knowing him, to worship him as God. That is the goal of theology, God himself, and therein lies its absolute importance and ultimate justification.

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THE MESSAGE OF 1 TIMOTHY AND TITUS

by John R.W. Stott

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'The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus' is the penultimate New Testament volume in 'The Bible Speaks Today' series of commentaries. The purpose of the series is 'to expound the biblical text with accuracy, to relate it to contemporary life, and to be readable'. John Stott has already written a number of commentaries in the series, including that on 2 Timothy ('Guard the Gospel', 1973), and in the present volume he deals with the other two Pastoral Epistles.

In his preface he notes the continuing relevance of the letters, drawing particular attention to their emphasis on the importance of truth and to the unique and definitive nature of the apostolic proclamation of truth now contained in the writings of the New Testament. It is a theme that he emphasises throughout his exposition, displaying a real Pauline concern for the defence of the evangelical truth of the gospel. In a further introductory chapter he briefly discusses the authenticity of the Pastoral Epistles and concludes in favour of Pauline authorship.

The bulk of the book expounds the two epistles. Stott divides 1 Timothy into six major sections and Titus into three. Each section is in turn subdivided to clarify the development of the apostle's argument, the commentary proceeding section-by-section rather than verse-by-verse and thus enabling the reader to grasp the flow of the letters. In line with the aim of the series the author aims at exposition rather than technical exegesis, but he nevertheless pays careful and detailed attention to the biblical text. He explains it in its cultural and historical context, occasionally referring to the original Greek (which is transliterated), and also applies it appropriately to contemporary issues although at times these are of relevance more to western than African concerns. Thus on 1 Timothy 1:3-20 Stott identifies the error Paul is combating as one that contained both Jewish and Gnostic elements, and applies what Paul is saying by contrasting his concern for truth with the relativistic rejection of the very idea of truth which is characteristic of Postmodernism. Again on 1 Timothy 4:3-10 he identifies certain strains of Jewish and Greek thought as possible sources of the asceticism that Paul condemns, and later in his application emphatically refutes the suggestion made by some today that Paul's argument from creation provides a justification for homosexual practice. On occasion Stott commends certain African traditions in the light of Paul's teaching, such as respect for the elderly (commenting on 1 Timothy 5:1-2), and material care for them in the context of

the extended family (on 1 Timothy 5:3-8).

Where the biblical text raises contentious issues he takes them up and discusses them. Thus on 1 Timothy 2:1-6 he considers Paul's statement that God wants all men to be saved in the light of the equally biblical doctrine of election; he points out that Paul was an exclusivist for whom Christ was the unique Saviour and salvation was received only by explicit faith in him; and he addresses the question of the extent of the atonement. Inevitably his remarks on these points are brief and sometimes inconclusive, but he does at least bring the issues to the readers' attention. He takes some time for the discussion of what he terms 'sexual roles in public worship' in 1 Timothy 2:8-15, 'probably the most controversial verses in the Pastoral Letters'. Here he prefaces his exposition with a brief discussion of hermeneutical principles before commenting on the text itself. He rejects the view that Paul's instruction about women's roles has only a local and transient significance related to the Ephesian situation, pointing out that such an approach would ultimately open 'the door to the wholesale rejection of apostolic teaching since virtually the whole of the New Testament was addressed to specific situations'. However his argument that a woman's submission to male authority is normative for all times, being part of the creation order, while the injunction to silence is merely a local application of the principle limited to the Ephesian context alone, is a somewhat unsatisfactory compromise. It is unclear why that particular application of submission should have been appropriate then but not now, particularly as the theological arguments Paul uses to support his injunctions seem to apply as much to the prohibition of women teaching men as to the demand for their submission to male authority. Nor is it too clear what he really understands submission to mean, either here or in Titus 2:5 where it is curious to say, as he does, that the command that younger women should be 'subject to their husbands' contains 'no demand for obedience'.

Nevertheless like many others in the series, this commentary offers a solid and thorough exposition that will be helpful not only to pastors, preachers and teachers but to anybody who wants to grapple seriously with the Word of God. It is systematic, readable, thorough and faithful to the text. It concludes with brief study guides on the two books, containing questions to encourage personal reflection and application, either in groups or individually.

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JESUS THE MESSIAH
A Survey of the Life of Christ

by Robert H. Stein

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The fly-leaf of Stein's 'Jesus the Messiah' informs the reader that it has been over twenty-five years since an evangelical scholar wrote a textbook survey of the life of Christ. Stein therefore aims to offer a new account which takes note of the 'new questions and critical challenges' that have arisen since then as well as 'the contemporary renaissance of our knowledge of the world of Jesus'. It is well and vigorously written and brings together a great deal of information and discussion, raising perhaps all the major areas of debate in the study of the life of Christ but with a light touch and avoiding a cumbersome parade of scholarship. It is therefore accessible to the general reader, and particularly useful to teachers preparing courses on the life of Christ and their pupils who must study them. The possibly questionable decision not to use footnotes, on the grounds that the task of adequately footnoting a life of Christ would be an impossible one, does make it harder for the reader to follow up particular points, but there are short bibliographies at the end of each chapter.

The introduction briefly refers to the history of lives of Christ in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, arguing that all three 'quests' for the historical Jesus have been vitiated by the use of an anti-supernaturalistic historical-critical method which has excluded *a priori* the miraculous. In consequence they have tended to produce portraits of Jesus which simply mirror the scholars who wrote them, a point which is developed in the first chapter aptly entitled, 'Where you start determines where you finish'. By contrast Stein assumes 'the presence of the supernatural in the life of Jesus' and argues that the burden of proof lies with those who deny the historicity of the gospels. 'The Gospel stories are presumed truthful unless proven otherwise.'

Nevertheless, in the course of the book he does appear to be prepared to question the gospel record at certain points. The discussion of the so-called 'criteria of authenticity' towards the end of the second chapter seems to accept that at least some of the sayings of Jesus contained in the gospels might in principle be inauthentic: 'If a teaching of Jesus fits these criteria, the likelihood of its being authentic is increased, and the more criteria that it meets, the more likely is its authenticity.' However at the end of this discussion he reiterates the view that 'the Gospel traditions should be assumed authentic unless proven

inauthentic.' In the same chapter Stein suggests that in Luke's version of the parable of the Great Supper (Lk. 14:15-24) the second sending out of the servants to seek replacement guests is an addition to the original parable as told by Jesus. His argument here is based in part on the version of the parable found in the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* to which, exceptionally among the non-canonical gospels, he accords some historical value. Similarly in chapter 10, 'The Person of Jesus', Stein suggests, 'Some of the passion predictions may also be more detailed and "filled out" by what subsequently happened.' The expression of such views does imply a somewhat qualified confidence in the historical reliability of the gospels. However they are rarely encountered in the course of the discussion, and in general the author stoutly defends the historicity of the gospel accounts against their critics and seeks to harmonise apparent discrepancies between them.

The book is divided into two main sections. The first and much briefer of the two is entitled 'Key Issues in Studying the Life of Christ', in which Stein discusses three principal issues: the influence of presuppositions on scholarly investigation; the historical sources for studying the life of Christ; and the evidence available for constructing a chronology of his life and ministry. It is in the second part that he considers the life of Christ, each chapter taking a particular theme such as the conception and birth of Jesus, early years, baptism, temptation and so on. Reflecting to some degree the balance of the gospels themselves almost half of this part of the book is concerned with the events that took place from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem up to the resurrection. Some chapters contain remarkably concise but effective summaries of key areas. This is true for example of those on the teaching and the person of Jesus.

Stein combines a historical and a theological approach to the life and ministry of Christ. Thus on the one hand he deals with the unfolding events themselves, discussing contentious areas, such as the date of the Last Supper. He interacts with arguments which cast doubt on the historical accuracy of the gospels, which he defends consistently so making the book a useful apologetic tool. This is particularly evident in his vindication of the historicity of the empty tomb and critique of the many non-supernatural explanations used to explain it and to deny the resurrection. In the face of the often bizarre speculations which sometimes pass as scholarship he is throughout conservative and restrained in his interpretation of the biblical text. Thus, for example, he rejects the argument that Joseph's death had a great psychological impact on Jesus' development: 'Those who speak of his death as the turning point in Jesus' life, of the crushing blow that this caused Jesus due to his "father fixation", are writing creative fiction.' On Judas' betrayal of Jesus, Stein writes, 'All attempts to "psychoanalyze" Judas's motive are simply speculative.' Similarly he

demonstrates the absurdity of fanciful reconstructions of the history and background of the hypothetical Q document: 'It becomes clear that historical research has switched to the writing of fiction in such a procedure.'

On the other hand Stein explains the theological significance of what is going on, and particularly of the principal events. Where theological significance is itself the subject of debate he discusses the alternatives and normally reaches a definite conclusion, as with the 'rock saying' (Mt. 16:17-19), the purification of the Temple and the transfiguration. In the discussion of the Lord's Supper there is even a brief résumé and discussion of the Catholic, Lutheran, Zwinglian and Calvinist understandings of Jesus' words about the bread and wine.

Some of the theological judgements Stein makes are debatable. In line with his general aversion to any speculation he seems to find no particular theological significance in the virgin conception, arguing that its importance lies not in the doctrine of Christ but of Scripture. More questionably he maintains that the temptation accounts presuppose that Jesus was capable of sin. Inevitably in such a relatively brief study of such a vast subject there are areas omitted or only cursorily dealt with, and at the same time one might occasionally question the issues Stein *has* chosen to discuss. Thus in the chapter on the transfiguration he spends the best part of a page debating the identity of the mountain on which the event took place. Nevertheless this is a minor quibble. In general the work is of very high quality indeed, a model of concise, relevant and accessible scholarship which, with only slight reservation, can be strongly recommended.

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