

Book Reviews

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE
MAJOR TRADITIONS

Paul Avis (ed.)

London: SPCK, 2002 232pp £19.99 pb ISBN 0-281-05246-8

This book is a collection of essays on ecclesiology, or rather the peculiar ecclesiologies, of a wide range of denominational families: Eastern Orthodox, Presbyterian and Reformed, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Baptist and Pentecostal, Old Catholic (Union of Utrecht), and Lutheran. Except for Pentecostalism, these essays were written by a member of the relevant denominational family, thus presenting each tradition's ecclesiology in its fullest and most favourable light. Each essay outlines how a particular denomination or denominational family understands itself as 'church', its standpoint in relating to other denominations and families, and its approach to diversity and unity and especially to ecumenism. Each essay examines how the denominational position sees itself and other such families, the claims it makes for itself and how it views the claims of others, and sets forth the sources of its ecclesiology, *e.g.*, Scriptures, tradition, experience, pragmatism, and councils.

With one or two exceptions, all contributors give very up-to-date presentations of their position and refer to the very latest developments in their denominational families and their relations with other traditions. The chapter on Anglicanism even includes Internet websites in its bibliography.

The book contains an excellent and up-to-date treatment of recent Anglican agreements towards intercommunion in various parts of the world with denominations of other traditions and the factors that impede even closer ties. There is a very revealing exposition of the Lutheran doctrine of the 'two kingdoms' and its practical ramifications for Christian life and ecclesiology, thus accounting for the wide variation in Lutheran polities that Anglicans may find puzzling. The essay on Roman Catholicism discusses recent developments that modify past authoritarianism and rigidity and ease ecumenical dialogue and explain why Rome still refuses Holy Communion to members of other Christian churches.

Because each essay (except the one on Pentecostalism) was written by a person inside its denominational family, the depictions tend to be rosy idealisations. With one, or possibly two, exceptions, they assume automatic harmony and

agreement within a church and fail to discuss how dissent and conflict on practical matters are resolved within a denomination. I believe that the book should have included treatments and criticisms of each position by a member of another denominational family, or at least extensive comments by the editor, in order to obtain a more balanced treatment and shed more light and draw comparisons so that the reader can appreciate the similarities and differences among the various ecclesiologies.

Another criticism I have relates to the treatment of Pentecostalist ecclesiology, It is in the same chapter as the Baptist and was written by a Baptist. Because of the large and growing number of Pentecostalists all over the world, it would have been more appropriate to have a separate essay on them, written by one of their own. Indeed, the Baptist author admits 'it should not be assumed that they [Baptists and Pentecostalists] have similar ecclesiologies with only minor differences'. Because there is a lack of substantial works on Pentecostalist ecclesiology, the editor may have felt it necessary to have a Baptist write about them, but I think this book would have been an excellent occasion to ask a Pentecostalist to contribute to the field by writing one.

Despite minor defects, this book provides a valuable contribution in easily understandable language to the consideration of an important aspect of church life that has been too widely overlooked.

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BUT DON'T ALL RELIGIONS LEAD TO GOD?

Navigating the multi-faith maze

Michael Green

Leicester: IVP, 2002

92pp

£5.99

ISBN: 1 85240 315 2

Dr. Michael Green is currently Senior Research Fellow at Wycliffe Hall. But he is better known as an evangelist and as an author of evangelistic books. Once again he has written a readable and engaging book that presents the Lord Jesus with the freshness of approach that comes from one who still speaks of Christ to others.

Indeed, as his introduction tells us, it was such an encounter that led him, while in hospital following a heart attack, to realise that a book like this was needed. And we have much to be thankful for in this work.

Jesus is the central figure of the book. Separate chapters, as their headings show, argue that No Other Great Teacher Even Claimed to Bring us to God, No Other Great Teacher Dealt Radically with Human Wickedness, No Other Great Teacher Broke the Final Barrier—Death, and No Other Teacher Offers to Live within His Followers. In sum, ‘Christianity is not a religion at all, but a revelation and a rescue and an ensuing relationship with God through Jesus Christ’ (p. 75). The final chapter calls us to faith using the analogies of marriage and joining the army as illustrations of commitment.

Mr. Green quotes freely from the Bible and also is aware of the teachings of (other) religions. For instance, he writes, ‘The Hindu doctrine of karma says, “You sin, you pay.” The cross of Christ shows God saying, “You sin, I pay.” And that is utterly unique!’ (p. 51). In particular, he contrasts Christianity with Islam. The Qur’an shows its founder to be inconsistent: ‘Muhammad (*sic*) took eleven wives and numerous concubines (sura 33.50), although he claimed divine revelation for the maximum of four wives (sura 4.3) (pp. 32-33).’ This inconsistency continues today as the usual lack of assurance for salvation for Moslems has been revoked in some quarters for suicide bombers. Indeed, the author observes that Islam is a violent religion. Mohammed organised the death of a critic (p. 33) and many Moslems today uphold the sura to put to death those who turn from Islam (p. 56). Green lets us know that Islam is ‘currently persecuting Christians in 32 countries’ (p. 72). However, not every reader will be happy with the simplicity of his reference to ‘the Islamic attack on the Twin Towers’ (p. 29).

But perhaps it is his comments on spiritual death that will cause most concern. As he has made known in previous publications, he asserts that ‘Christians should reject the idea of conscious unending torment’ (p. 80). On the same page he argues that the lake of fire ‘is not prepared for people but for all principles of evil’. Although he refers to some of the Lord’s words he does not include Matthew 25:46 and does not mention that God is glorified both in salvation and in judgement. (On the same page there also appears to be a misunderstanding regarding judgement according to deeds. The author seems to confuse this with salvation by works and rejects it. Yet 2 Corinthians 5:10 suggests it is right.)

Mr Green writes with a robust commitment to truth and doctrine but there are

other concerns too. His explanation of the cross stops short of saying that God is angry as he emphasises that God is ‘the great Lover who longs to have close intimacy with us’ (p. 49). Also, he insists that ‘Jesus never forces anyone to follow Him’ (p. 83). This is a good guide for our own evangelism but it does not explain Acts 9. God’s supposed inability to call us to himself reappears in Green’s exposition of Holman Hunt’s painting of Christ knocking at the door (inspired by Revelation 3.20). Green comments, ‘The absence of a handle on the outside shows that the door has to be opened on the inside’ (p. 88). This seems to owe more to an evangelist’s desire to encourage people to respond than to the picture of awesome majesty of Christ presented in the opening chapters of the Revelation.

One further quibble. It was not as early as 1961 that the Beatles claimed to be more famous than Jesus Christ (their first record was released in 1962) and George Harrison’s song ‘My Sweet Lord’ was not sung to Jesus but, as the final words say, to ‘Hare, Hare’ (*i.e.*, Krishna) (p. 28).

Yet we should not underestimate the courage, scholarship or devotion to Christ that this book exhibits. May every reader be renewed in his confidence in the gospel and in the Lord Jesus Christ who is its focus and in whose happy service it has so clearly been written.

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APPEALING TO SCRIPTURE IN MORAL DEBATE:

Five Hermeneutical Rules

Charles H. Cosgrove

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2002 232pp £15.99pb ISBN 0-8028-4942-3

Professor Cosgrove presents and discusses a number of hermeneutical assumptions that many Christians employ to make or justify decisions in ethics when purporting to use the Bible as the basis for such decisions. He seeks to enunciate these assumptions as rules so that they can be critiqued for the purposes of evaluating their strengths and weaknesses and helping Christians who appeal to Scripture in moral debate to examine their assumptions for coherence and defensibility. In this way, they can discover how consistent they are in using them. Cosgrove’s book particularly assists Christians who regularly employ such rules/assumptions without being able to articulate them.

Most of this book is devoted to five such rules, which Cosgrove especially selected to be illustrative rather than comprehensive. The five rules are not mutually exclusive but can, and should, be used together when making a moral decision based on Scripture as can, and should, be the seven lesser rules Cosgrove briefly describes in an appendix.

The first of the five rules is that the purpose or assumption behind a biblical moral rule carries more weight than the rule itself. To decide a moral issue, one must go beyond the bald statements of a rule to find and apply the spirit behind it. The second is the 'rule of analogy', which is used frequently and is entailed in every kind of moral appeal to Scripture when there is a gap between the culture of Bible times and our own. Although analogising is a natural reflex in appealing to the Bible in moral decision-making, its logic has rarely been analysed and its importance not always recognised.

The third rule states that when a particular biblical teaching about a practice differs from the prevailing view of the surrounding culture, the difference must be considered a sign of an especially significant biblical value or principle and is therefore to be accorded special weight. This is particularly true when the teaching expresses the voice or interest of persons oppressed or marginalized by the dominant society.

The fourth rule deals with situations where the Bible conveys a moral teaching on the basis of an assumption about the natural world that we now know to be empirically or scientifically untrue, such as statements about astronomy. This rule states that empirical or scientific matters are to some degree outside the scope of Scripture, or that Scripture is sufficient only for matters of faith and practice, not for all forms of knowledge. Cosgrove considers various forms and variations of this rule, such as the belief that, although a statement in the Bible about the natural world may be scientifically/empirically untrue, it may nevertheless be spiritually true.

The fifth rule states that where there are a number of reasonable interpretations of Scripture, the ethicist is to prefer the one that most accords with the Bible's overall moral and theological principles.

These five are not the only ones so used by Christians; they are simply

examples of how the conditions of modern life and thought have shaped appeals to Scripture in ethical debate. Cosgrove points out that there is no general agreement on such rules/assumptions.

Cosgrove presents a general discussion about hermeneutical rules and their place in ethical debate. He also discusses how some Christians alter rules when faced with fact patterns not contemplated by the rule-makers (such patterns necessitating a change in rule to do better justice to its purpose) or new knowledge (*i.e.*, unavailable or not contemplated by the rule-makers or merely alternative or competing knowledge). The relevant chapter on each of the five rules is accompanied by examples. These are topical and apt, but suffer from two failings.

First, Cosgrove does not use the same moral problem for all five, leaving the reader wondering how the other rules would apply to the same fact situation. The second failing lies in his comparison of the first rule to the method of legal reasoning employed by courts in the Commonwealth and the U.S.A. His view of the law is, to a degree, erroneous overlooking the fact that every single case is a potential precedent that can alter or refine a legal rule and that there are usually a multitude of cases with very similar (although not identical) fact situations which have been decided with sometimes quite different results. Unlike moral decision-making from the Bible as envisaged by Cosgrove, a lawyer or a judge must keep in mind such a multitude, not just the contents of one or a few books. Cosgrove also overlooks the fact that courts sometimes apply a number of interpretative rules in addition to the one analogous to his first rule.

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NOTHING GREATER, NOTHING BETTER:

Theological Essays on the Love of God K.J. Vanhoozer (ed.)
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2001 £16.99 pb 217pp ISBN 0802849024

This book contains ten essays from a variety of authors, all dealing with aspects of the love of God. These essays reveal a variety of methodological approaches, and a variety of theological conclusions regarding God's love.

Methodologically, the essays vary from biblical surveys to natural theology. Geoffrey Grogan (ch. 3) explores the different biblical expressions for God's

love for his people, the world and Christ, before attempting to interpret 1 John 4:8. Chapter 10 is a sermon on Hosea 11 by Roy Clements. At the other 'extreme', Paul Helm (ch. 8) explores the benevolence of God from the perspective of natural theology, examining empirical evidence before suggesting the implications for 'revealed' theology in this area.

In between, much attention is given to the views of past theologians, and to appropriate theological method. Gary D. Badcock (ch. 2) explores Nygren's views of divine love, Lewis Ayres (ch. 4) examines Augustine's homilies on 1 John, Tony Lane (ch. 7) explores the wrath of God particularly in relation to Dodd's thesis of an impersonal process of cause and effect, whilst Aquinas, Calvin and Barth receive coverage from a number of essays. Both Trevor Hart (ch. 5) and Alan J. Torrance (ch. 6) are concerned with the methodological question of truly speaking of the love of a transcendent God, and explore the limits of analogy. Torrance argues for the centrality of the Incarnation in human understanding of God.

Unsurprisingly, given the scope of the subject and the general brevity of the essays, most authors only offer provisional conclusions, or suggestions for further investigation. There is a wide field of investigation here, which makes the introductory essay by K. J. Vanhoozer (ch. 1) all the more useful. He provides a concise summary of the classical theist position on the love of God, and then examines twentieth century developments, before looking at the implications of those developments. The central issues he raises (pp. 13-23) are of fundamental importance in placing the remainder of the essays in the book. In particular, the question of the divine possibility receives considerable attention (chapters 2, 7, 9, and 10 in particular), as does divine sovereignty and human freedom.

Overall, this is a stimulating collection of essays, some covering broad conceptual ground, others focussing on narrower sections of the 'debate' concerning God's Love. With Vanhoozer's introductory essay as a guide, this is a thought-provoking book for those interested in the current debate, or in the application of different theological methods to a particular subject, the love of God.

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TURNING TO JESUS: THE SOCIOLOGY OF CONVERSION IN THE GOSPELS.

Scot McKnight

Louisville: WJK 2002 214pp pb £12.99 ISBN 0-664-22514-4

The crisis-conversions of Paul, Augustine, Luther and Wesley form a powerful paradigm for decision-based conversions, but persons who come to faith by socialisation (joining a Christian group) or liturgical conversion (participation in Christian rituals) feel marginalised if Christian conversions are viewed only through the lens of crisis and decision. McKnight aims to show that decision conversion was not the only mode of conversion in the gospels, and he believes that Peter rather than Paul should be the leading biblical paradigm of conversion to Christ.

The first main section expounds a consensus sociological model of conversion based on the works of Rambo and Viswanathan. McKnight identifies six dimensions of conversion: context, crisis, quest, encounter, commitment, and consequences. As each dimension is flexible enough to cover the range from the dramatic to a gentle nod of the soul, this turns out to be a highly comprehensive model. Key points of the exposition are illustrated by the testimonies of McKnight's students, told in their own words. These are the most moving and stimulating chapters of the book.

The rest of the book sees the sociological model applied to the gospels. A first look had revealed that they did not provide enough evidence for a study of conversion. But armed with his model and other reconstructions, McKnight returns to fill the gaps and unsurprisingly finds all the sociological dimensions of conversion to be present in the gospels. He concludes that there is variety in ancient conversions just as there is in modern experience.

Conversion is used throughout in its widest sociological sense to describe any movement to greater alignment with Jesus. This definition includes all who come to him for healing, food, forgiveness, acceptance, direction, clarification, and so on. Clearly this limits the usefulness of such a study if no account is taken of differences in level of commitment to Jesus, and in content of belief about him. In modern terms this sheds no light on the question of nominal converts, nor is it possible critically to examine the difference between converting to become a Christian and converting to become a pacifist.

The author's decision to investigate only the gospels is both curious and unexplained. It seems to exclude *a priori* the possibility that conversion to the risen Christ will differ in kind as well as in degree from other kinds of conversion. Furthermore it is no great surprise that Peter's gradual awakening emerges as the dominant paradigm, since this is how the disciples' understanding developed in the gospels. There are surely better ways of responding to the over-rigid use of a single conversion paradigm than to avoid unfavourable evidence. The students' stories are such powerful motivations for the author that he might have done better to stick with them.

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REFORMATION AND SCHOLASTICISM: AN ECUMENICAL ENTERPRISE (Texts and Studies in Reformation & Post-Reformation Thought) Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker (eds.)
Grand Rapids: Baker 2001 320 pp pb £19.99 ISBN 0-8010-2242-8

This collection of essays, mainly by European scholars, is an admirable addition to the 'Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought' series. The volume represents the approach to post-Reformation theology which has become dominant over the past two decades.

Richard Muller's fine opening chapter on 'The Problem of Protestant Scholasticism' sets the stage for the entire volume by defining scholasticism as a particular theological method which 'echoed the patterns of disputation then typical of education' (p. 54). Muller highlights the methodological continuity between medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation theology, and evaluates Protestant scholasticism in strongly positive terms. In spite of considerable diversity in other respects, the volume's thirteen contributors hold in common these basic assumptions about Protestant scholasticism. Thus they explore and articulate the thesis that there is a fundamental continuity between medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation theology, and that this continuity is a positive feature of post-Reformation (especially Reformed) orthodoxy.

Underlying several of the essays is a special interest in relating the thought of Protestant scholasticism to the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. Especially noteworthy in this respect is the study by the Catholic scholar, Harm Goris,

which explores the Calvinist Thomism of Zanchius's doctrine of God (Chapter 5), as well as Frits Broeyer's fascinating account of the use of St Thomas in William Whitaker's polemics against Rome (Ch. 7).

Medieval continuity and discontinuity in the Reformed doctrine of God is another point of recurring emphasis throughout the volume (especially Chs. 5 and 9), and students of the doctrine of God will find much that is of interest in the discussions of the divine attributes (pp. 216-26), knowledge (pp. 222-23), simplicity (pp. 137-39), will (pp. 269-72) and power (pp. 245-50).

One of the most striking features of the whole volume is the attention given to English theologians. William Ames (Chapter 6), William Whitaker (Ch. 7) and John Owen (Chs. 8 and 11) are discussed in detail; and the venerable but much-neglected William Twisse even receives some attention (pp. 265-67). This focus on English divines is a healthy corrective to the tendency in earlier scholarship to consider Reformed orthodoxy as an almost purely continental phenomenon, or to regard English theology as developing along fundamentally different lines from continental theology.

Some of the implications of the history of Protestant scholasticism are explored in the closing section, 'Scholasticism and Present-Day Theology'. The two chapters in this section argue for the relevance of the scholastic method for contemporary dogmatics and hermeneutics respectively. The former essay commends scholasticism as a method for inquiring systematically as to how a believer may 'arrive at an authentic integration' between scientific knowledge and theological belief, thus synthesising both frameworks 'into a single form of life' (p. 292)—although the obvious problems here are the vast range and rapid fluxion of modern scientific thought, problems which did not confront St. Thomas when he produced his integrative *Summa*. The final essay suggests a moderate restructuring of hermeneutic theory along scholastic lines, concluding that the scholastic method offers a way forward for theology, in spite of the fact that ultimately we can never 'hold the message of the Bible in our grasp' (p. 306).

Reformation and Scholasticism makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the nuanced relationships existing between Protestant orthodoxy and the theology of the late medieval and Reformation periods; it

provides an excellent introductory glimpse of the landscape of current post-Reformation scholarship. The volume will be a welcome addition to the libraries of all students of the period, and of those with a general interest in the history of Protestant orthodoxy.

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THE HOW AND WHY OF LOVE

An Introduction to Evangelical Ethics

Michael Hill

Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2002 £10.00 pb ISBN 1-876326-45X

Love is central to Christianity and this book applies it for us. Using the English Standard Version, it searches the Scriptures making 'the gospel the key to a right interpretation and understanding' (p. 63). The setting is contemporary Australia but the book deserves wider reading.

Michael Hill lectures in ethics at Moore College, Sydney. His work is full of insight both on other views (*e.g.*, Natural Law 'lessens the importance of Scripture, p. 48) and on Scripture itself (*e.g.*, each 'do not' of the Ten Commandments 'presupposes a spirit of rebellion and disobedience', p. 74).

The first half of the book sets out the theory. The Trinity is our example of love, 'interrelationism' as preferable to either individualism or collectivism, and the author proposes a 'retrieval ethic' (reclaiming what is good from a bad situation). The approach is inclusivist: 'Motive, the nature of the act, and consequences are all considered to be relevant factors as far as morality is concerned.' (p. 128)

Then Mr Hill applies this teaching to five topics. The first three are addressed directly in Scripture. For each of them the whole biblical narrative is explored from Eden (the rejection of God's majesty and order) to the promise of Christ's return (the kingdom consummated). The first topic is marriage. This 'is a covenant or agreement between a man and a woman based on mutual love' (p. 152). The second topic is divorce and remarriage. This is not permitted for adultery (because of the example of the Father's unconditional love) but may be so following the desertion by an unbelieving spouse because 'the goal of a mutual love relationship cannot be achieved' (p. 166). The third topic is

homosexuality. This is wrong but ‘people ought to refrain from making public evaluations in contexts where such evaluations might incite harm’ (p. 192).

The other topics are examples of ones not raised in Scripture. For them it is sufficient to draw out relevant material from appropriate parts of the Bible. On this basis, we find that abortion is wrong (the clearest exception being where a mother’s life is in danger). This is because the unborn child ‘is a human being and an emerging person’ (p. 222). Euthanasia is also wrong although ‘Christians must make every effort as a group to provide for the welfare of the terminally ill and to relieve their suffering’ (p. 243). However, ‘the suffering of pain can strengthen Christian faith for it amplifies the meaning of Jesus’ suffering and death’ (p. 238). Then the final chapter is a strong call to personal morality.

The author uses words that will get him a hearing in a confused church (*e.g.*, humans, humankind). However, certain technical terms (deontological, perichoresis) and lesser-used words (habituate, bi-polar, conjoin) may put off some readers. Occasionally a point was assumed rather than demonstrated, *e.g.*, the contention that ‘Jewish scholars, as well as Jesus, summarized the Law and the Prophets in terms of loving both God and neighbour’ (p. 103).

The author says that ‘issues of the nature of social justice, the structures of government, education, family, etc., have been left for another time’ (p. 9). Lord-willing, such a time will not be far off, and we will be helped even more to see how love works.

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