

CRITICAL BOOK REVIEWS

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Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction, by Cornelis van der Kooi and Gijsbert van de Brink, trans. Reinder Bruinsma and James D. Bratt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017. xiv pp. + 759 pp. + 8 pp. bibliography + 39 pp. indexes. Hardcover. US\$ 45.00.

Originally published in Dutch in 2012, *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction* is more than an introduction to systematic theology. Written by two recognized Dutch Reformed theologians, this book represents a contemporary theological tour de force, setting a high standard for any systematic theology to come. Opening the sixteen-chapters book, the first chapter defines dogmatics as disciplined thinking about God. Part of systematic theology, together with hermeneutics and ethics, dogmatics aims at “clarifying human existence in the light of faith” (p. 23), being both normative and innovative. After establishing the locus and nature of dogmatics, the authors dedicate the next three chapters to theology proper. Chapter 2 approaches the question of God’s existence. Given that “the only ground for faith in God is God himself” (p. 38), dogmatics attempts to justify the belief in God, but not in a strong foundationalist sense. While *fides historica* can accept even proofs for God’s existence, it only does so because of the experiential warrant of *fides salvifica*. The next chapter

introduces the doctrine of the Trinity. After indicating some biblical proto-Trinitarian patterns, the authors briefly outline the historical move from an economic to an ontological Trinity and trace the Western oneness emphasis as compared to the social-communitarian accent of Eastern Christianity. In addition, the authors suggest that the "inner richness" of plurality which "does not destroy but rather articulates God's oneness" (p. 106) represents an appropriate starting point in the Christian-Muslim discussions.

Chapter 4 explores the biblical divine names, God's attributes, and the divine essence. Recognizing the Greek influence on theology proper, Kooi and Brink indicate two main areas where the inevitable Greek impact was negative. First, early Christians kept immanence and transcendence separate, with a focus on the latter. Second, holding on to the *analogia entis* principle, they argued that created reality participates in the divine essence. As a corrective, the authors propose to start with the divine acts reflecting his condescendence in the Bible and then to move to his transcendence.

Chapter 5 tackles the doctrine of revelation. Explaining their decision to place this doctrine of the one on Trinity, the authors state that "[t]he content of revelation is theologically more important than the concept of revelation" (166, emphasis original). For them, revelation is always indirect, mediated by our human earthliness. The next chapter explores the doctrine of creation, presented as a divine act of both will and goodness, in close relation to Trinitarian providence. The authors maintain that Christian theology should "maintain a critical attitude toward *evolutionism*" (p. 227, emphasis original) with the purpose of enlisting it in proclaiming the gospel, after removing its ideology. The theme of creation is continued in chapter 7 with anthropology. After describing several methodological approaches and the three views on *imago Dei* (structural, functional, relational), Kooi and Brink discuss the concept of the soul. They opt for moderate dualism, assuming a psychosomatic unity between body and soul, yet allowing for their separation at death, affirming that the soul "will somehow continue to exist with God" (p. 271). Embracing a relational view of *imago Dei*, the authors define in the next chapter sin as covenant-breaking, which includes at its core estrangement from God, but also allows us to speak about sin as power or act.

After exploring the continuation between Israel and the Christian church through the divine covenant in chapter 9, the authors move to Christology, to which they dedicate the next two chapters. Chapter 10 focuses on the person of Christ while chapter 11 deals with his work, mainly in his earthly ministry, following Gustav Aulén's threefold structure (victory, satisfaction, and transformation). The next chapter is dedicated to pneumatology. Focusing on the role the Spirit plays in relating God to human beings, it offers a useful background of the contemporary renewed interest in this topic. The doctrine of Scripture is outlined in

chapter 13. The authors proffer the theological interpretation of Scripture as an answer to the challenges of historical-criticism and postmodernism. If the Spirit and the Scripture are intended to draw humans to God, then ecclesiology, addressed in chapter 14, aims at facilitating their participation within the Christian community. The ecclesiological presentation is from a Reformed perspective, yet addressing the differences found in the Orthodox, Catholic, or Lutheran traditions. Chapter 15 focuses on soteriology (repentance, conversion, justification, participation, transformation, and perseverance). The authors reject an ontic approach (divine election precedes and encompasses history) for a noetic one, thus leaving the discussion on election at the end of their soteriological discussion. Although divine election is not "the main element in our thinking" (p. 702), the authors muse, it is needed to safeguard salvation as a divine prerogative alone. The last chapter of the book is dedicated to eschatology, zooming in on recent developments. When it comes to the nature of hell, the authors are only tentative, stating that the Bible does not allow definite answers on this topic. "Death means separation from the life-giving God" (p. 747), write the authors while describing hell as the opposite of God's life-giving presence.

Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction is written with the student in mind. Each chapter is preceded by a list of learning outcomes, offering a bird's-eye view of it. In addition, several questions are posed, connecting the content of the book with the contemporary context of the reader. Keeping the tradition of dogmatic treaties, the authors insert in smaller type various paragraphs providing further details on specific ideas. Each chapter is followed by an updated reference list useful for further study. The authors do not shy away from criticizing their Reformed tradition, but always "with a sense of loyalty" (p. xi). This can be seen in their discussion of eschatology, for example. The sense of loyalty is felt in several areas. In their discussion about covenant and Israel, the authors recognize the Ten Commandments as the "ever-valid moral law" (p. 362), but as a covenant-marker, the Sabbath is considered ambiguous. Without offering their evaluation, the authors mention that "the Sabbath commandment was generally thought to apply to Sunday" (p. 363). It is a loss that the authors do not refer to the vast existing Sabbath literature which considers Sabbath only as a moral commandment. When it comes to Christology, the authors focus on Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension but do not explore his post-ascension ministry. While referring to the concept of mediation, Kooi and Brink nevertheless limit it to the past, exploring how Christ is prophet, priest, and king. The Reformed tradition is also reflected in their discussion of the soul. Furthermore, while departing from the mainstream Reformed tradition in their discussion of divine election, placing it at the end of their presentation, this does not solve the problem of history's futility-given divine election but only avoids confrontation.

Although written from a Western perspective, *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction* represents a fresh contemporary account which may prove very useful for those working in a Western context. The authors did an excellent job of synthesizing recent Reformed thought. The book should be part of every theologian's library. Supplemented with other recent volumes (like Norman Gulley's *Systematic Theology* or Zondervan's *New Studies in Dogmatics* series), *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction* is recommended as a textbook for teaching at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

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Prophets in Conflict: Issues in Authority, by George R. Knight. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2020. 204 pp. + 4 pp. index. ISBN 978-0-8163-6670-5. Softcover.

George R. Knight is a prolific author in the areas of the history of Seventh-day Adventists and Ellen G. White's writings. His *Prophets in Conflict: Issues in Authority* contains majority of his thoughts for forty years on E. White's voluminous writings. This book, according to the author, "is my final major contribution to Ellen White's studies" (p. 8) and is intended to impress some important ideas on the readers. Thus, most chapters of this volume are selected from his prior publications and speeches. Only chapter 10 is specifically written for this book.

This work has fourteen chapters divided into five parts. The first part has two chapters. In this part, the author introduces the difference between the Mormons and the Seventh-day Adventists, especially on the authority of their prophets' writings. While Joseph Smith set an example of uplifting his writings above the Bible, E. White pointed to the Bible as the truth's standard. While Smith regarded the Bible as insufficient because it contains incomplete truth, E. White accepted the Scriptures as a complete revelation of God to teach us the way to salvation. These differences continue in the hermeneutical system of both denominations. However, as Knight points out, Mormon's danger, an effort to lift a prophet's writings to be at least equal with the Scriptures, always existed in the Seventh-day Adventist Church since the second-generation of leaders took the lead (p. 36).

To prevent the Mormon temptation from entering the Adventist Church, the author provides frameworks for understanding E. White's writings and her authority in part two. In this part, six chapters explain the subject. The author starts with the six reasons why the prophetess wrote her writings. This chapter is followed by his explanation of some significant