

Review: Christian Doctrine

William J. Richardson, General Editor
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Christian Doctrine is a recent offering in Standard Publishing's textbook series. The book is a collection of scholarly essays by sixteen writers. The reader will find much that is profitable; in particular, David Root's chapter "God the Father," Edwin S. Nelson's "The Way of Salvation," and James Van Buren's "The Christian Life." These offerings are generally superior; other chapters contain material that is more than worthwhile.

Books of this sort are common. They are almost always fragmented and uneven—by their nature—and therefore not usable as class texts. Christian Doctrine is not written at the undergraduate level; it might be assigned for support of a graduate course, especially a seminar.

The book will never be used in my classroom, however, for a more fundamental reason: Christian Doctrine, in at least ten of its eighteen chapters, manifests an unacceptably low view of divine revelation. The writers operate from the Neo-Orthodox paradigm of inspiration; and what is more disappointing, the reader is not given the index of Neo-Orthodox code words he needs to appreciate what these men are really saying. Instead, eight of the contributing scholars have honed and sculpted their language to achieve a delicate balance. They are academically respectable to certain peers (who know the code), while they sound traditionally orthodox to the general reader.

Since Fred P. Thompson, Jr. was selected to write on inspiration, his is a key chapter. He is effusive—poetic even—in his praise of Scripture; he is also ambiguous. Despite the rhetorical elegance, Thompson does not write from a belief in verbal inspiration and inerrancy—the view that equates the Bible with the Word of God. His is a synthetic view of inspiration—an attempt at a compromise between the old orthodoxy and 19th-century liberalism (which ruled out revelation). His problem: How to affirm the Bible as divine revelation without committing to a belief in absolute factual trustworthiness? How to kindly accuse the Bible of falsehood and still use it as a credible witness? How to use the Bible to condemn the errors of man while allowing man to judge the errors of the Bible?

The Neo-Orthodox solution: Redesign the doctrine of inspiration, creating new categories, distinctions, and a new vocabulary to support them. The Neo-Orthodox formula: Water down the Bible's own claims regarding inspiration. Redefine revelation to mean a personal confrontation between God and man now-and-again in history; call this an event. Make a fundamental distinction between Scripture and revelation, then identify Scriptures as a not-necessarily-accurate human witness of these "revelatory events." Reduce inspiration to a not-quite-defined, nonspecific, act of God in presiding loosely over the process of recording the witness (a view touching the autographs). Identify Word of God primarily with the event, rather than with the witness. Deny that doctrines are revelation; demote them to that status of mere nonessential formulations of religious thought. Since, in the scheme, revelation is imperfectly reflected in the Bible and is directly available only in the historical events of which Scripture bears witness, make the historian the final arbiter of The Faith. In the case of the Church, assign the scholar the job of examining the history of the first-century Church ("study Christian origins") in order to discover the real Jesus and the normative form of Christianity.

Now read Thompson (chapter 2). He offers a discourse on the philosophy of language that (1) contains serious historical and logical errors, and (2) undermines confidence in Scripture because it is the Word of God in written form, rather than spoken. Check his categories. Under revelation: event, message, disclosure, Word of God, confront, phenomena. Under Scripture: witness, description, interpretation, recital, literary deposit of the testimony. Hear him: "The recital of the acts of God contained in these Scriptures is an indispensable

component of the Word of God.” Again: “When inspired men and women understand this disclosure as an action of God, revelation occurs.” Once more: “If we are to understand the Bible as the Word of God, we must give primary attention to history.”

Mr. Thompson is subtle. He says that “God inspired (breathed on) men through the Holy Spirit to proclaim and preserve His word.” Is there a difference between the Spirit specifically breathing Scripture (II Tim. 3:16) and His breathing on men who wrote? Yes, all the difference in the world—if you know what lies behind the language. Thompson says good things about the importance of historical contexts as it informs the hermeneutical process; but he intertwines this principle with that of historical criticism of the text, which is not the same thing at all.

Space does not permit a discussion of all the dangerous errors in the Neo-Orthodox approach to Scripture; I point out four basic ones: (1) The historical-critical method is governed by an a priori assumption of what is historically possible and is, therefore, fundamentally subjective. (2) Neo-Orthodoxy embraces a defective model of revelation and inspiration. While we, of course, cannot speak of revelation apart from history, historical events per se are not revelation. In many cases, the only event is the act of the Holy Spirit directly giving the writer of Scripture that which is to be written. Nonverbal events are unexplicit; there is no special revelation until another equally supernatural event takes place: the accurate record and infallible interpretation. Ultimately, therefore, the written Word is the revelation, not the event. Scripture is the once-for-all telling of the mind of God; finality resides there, not in historiography. (3) Neo-orthodoxy sets up the irrational dichotomy of historical vs. theological truth. In this system, historical statements in the Bible need not be entirely accurate in order to support a true theology. Therefore falsehood and truth have equal value. But if God can reveal Himself through false propositions just as well as through true ones, we can never be sure that what God tells us is true. (4) It does no good for the scholar to protest that he does not accept all of the conclusions of Barth, Küng, & Co. if he uses the methodology of Neo-orthodoxy. The road to the left always leads to the left.

General Editor William Richardson charts the philosophical course for Christian Doctrine in the preface: “The Christian faith is not primarily an affirmation of doctrine, but rather a confession of Jesus as Lord” (as if the Lordship of Jesus were not a doctrine). A first step in Neo-orthodoxy is to separate Jesus from doctrine. Then the theologian can sound as devout as a saint as he elevates Jesus, while he quietly undercuts the historical credibility of the Bible—ultimately leaving the believer with little more than an existential Christ. In chapter one, Richardson subscribes the Gospel vs. Doctrine dichotomy. He resurrects the discredited C. H. Dodd thesis of a theological distinction between preaching (Gospel-Jesus) and teaching (doctrine). Incredibly, Editor Richardson permits Leroy Garrett, in chapter three, to give a second extended presentation of Dodd’s theory. Garrett decides that doctrine plays second-fiddle to Gospel, and that doctrine must be put aside as nonessential for the sake of ecumenicity. According to Garrett, baptism is not part of the Gospel.

In chapter four, “The Nature of Biblical Faith,” Garrett combines the Calvinian theory of infused grace with Karl Barth’s concept of existential faith. He assumes Calvin’s doctrine of illumination. Then Garrett makes the standard Neo-orthodox distinction between faith in Christ and faith-as-response-to-doctrine. What is the classroom teacher supposed to do with this piece of confusion?

Robert Hull views the Old Testament as “an essential witness . . . to the revelation of God.” Ronald Heine (who does not resort to hyper-academic obfuscation) writes on the life of Jesus. He openly favors the two-source hypothesis with its assumption of Markan priority. Burton B. Thurston uses the historical-critical method freely; it leads to such speculative theories as the one that has John selecting the Miracle at Cana for its symbolic value.

Frederick Norris uses the word “story” for the Adam and Eve account, and discusses it in such a way that the general reader is led to think that the author holds Genesis 2-3 to be history (as we normally use that term).

He doesn't. Norris denies the reality of demons and demon possession as recorded in the Gospel narratives, but you have to look close to see him do it.

In the important chapter on salvation, Ron Durham uses the standard jargon of Neo-orthodoxy. He inaccurately lumps the penal substitution concept of atonement in with Anselm's satisfaction theory. Most unsatisfactory. Furthermore, Durham writes that "the Bible itself does not present a systematic doctrine of atonement." This is absurd. He seems to find the idea of salvation from the wrath of God distasteful to the modern mind, but this gives him no right to claim the New Testament for his side.

Robert Fife, writing on the Church, follows Hans Küng with utter faithfulness. He takes the Neo-orthodox position that the Church is the mystical body of Christ, in and through which the Holy Spirit makes his primary revelation—the first-century Church being the norm. The New Testament, according to Fife, is not the law of God for the Church, but merely a witness to the first-century "tradition."

Most of the above-named writers seem to have been in a contest to see who could crowd his end-of-chapter notes with the largest selection of Neo-orthodox and Existentialist books. Many Evangelical scholars are conspicuous by their absence. No doubt Christian Doctrine will enhance the reputation of these men in the Neo-evangelical and liberal academic communities; the book cuts away at the foundation of that which it claims to defend—the faith Once Delivered.

Standard Publishing is to be commended for its interest in Christian higher education; good textbooks are always needed. But Christian Doctrine represents a philosophical departure from Standard's traditional stand on the Bible.