

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

June 1998

Copyright 1998 John W. Robbins Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692

Email: jrob1517@aol.com

Website: www.trinityfoundation.org

Telephone: 423.743.0199

Fax: 423.743.2005

Morton Smith's Systematic Theology

Reviewed by W. Gary Crampton

Dr. Morton H. Smith is a systematic theologian teaching at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Greenville, South Carolina. Dr. Smith is no novice in the study of theology. His earliest education in the Scriptures was from his parents, both of whom were Presbyterian. Dr. Smith earned his B. D. from Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, and received his Ph.D. under G. C. Berkouwer at the Free University of Amsterdam. His doctoral dissertation on Southern Presbyterian theology was later published in book form.¹ After a brief pastorate, Dr. Smith was called to chair the Bible Department of Belhaven College, Jackson, Mississippi, where he later became the founding professor of Reformed Theological Seminary. After 15 years Smith was named Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, where he served for 16 years. He then went on to become the founding professor of the Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

Morton Smith has instructed many young men who have gone into the ministry. The present reviewer has had more than a few of these former students tell him how grateful they are to Dr. Smith for their years under his tutelage. This reviewer has also benefited from Dr. Smith's teaching, through personal conversations, the study of his audiotapes, and from reading his works. Morton Smith is a

humble man of God who is to be applauded for much of his teaching, such as (to name just a few): his denunciation of Roman Catholicism, his adherence to six-day creationism, his Biblical view on justification by grace through faith alone, and his strong stance on the cessation of the revelatory gifts.

This being said, however, there are criticisms to be voiced. Although his two volume *Systematic Theology* is helpful in a number of ways, there are serious errors that should be pointed out. This review will attempt to deal with these defects.

Method

In the second chapter, "The Method of Systematic Theology," Dr. Smith claims that "non-Christians maintain that man reasons univocally," and Christians "maintain that all human reason is analogical" (I: 25). Here the author reveals the influence of Cornelius Van Til on his thought. Van Til, who is cited frequently throughout these two volumes, is well known for his strong denial that man's thoughts and God's thoughts coincide at any point. Since God is omniscient, knowing all truth, if man cannot think God's thoughts after him, then man can never know the truth. Skepticism is the result. Despite how often this has been pointed out, Van Tilians continue to make this fatal mistake.²

¹ *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962).

² To his credit, Dr. Smith attempts to deal with this issue. But the results are very muddled. He writes: "In this connection it

Then there is Dr. Smith's faulty view of logic, also due to Van Til's influence. He writes: "For the non-Christian, the law of contradiction is a principle of logic that stands above God and man alike. This means that God and man are correlative. God and man are under the same system of logic, which is higher than both and exists independent of both. . . . For the Christian, on the other hand, God exists before time and laws of logic. The law of contradiction is a part of the created temporal world. . . . The Christian can and does use the law of contradiction to deal logically with the facts of the temporal world, but he does not use it to say what can or cannot be true about God himself" (I: 25, 26).

Contrary to Dr. Smith's view, the Bible teaches that Christ is the Logic of God (*John* 1:1ff.; the Greek *logos* is the word from which "logic" is derived).³ Further, since Christ, the *Logos*, is the one who "gives light to every man who comes into the world" (*John* 1:9), it is evident that God's logic and man's logic are the same logic. There is no distinction between divine logic and "mere human logic." Logic is not above God, and neither is it a temporal creation. John wrote that logic is God. If logic were a creation, as asserted by Van Til and Smith, then God must be other than logical. As Augustine and Clark pointed out time and again, since God is eternal and omniscient, he must be eternally rational, that is, eternally logical. The laws of logic, then, are the way God thinks. And if we are to think in a manner that pleases God, we have to think as the *Logos* thinks: logically.

should be observed that we speak of human knowledge as analogical. This is perfectly proper, when we use the term correctly. It should not be used to say that the object of our knowledge is an analogy of the Truth. Our knowledge is analogical, or after the likeness of the knowledge of God, but the object of our knowledge is not analogical. Our knowledge is analogical, but it is not an analogy of God that we know. We know the Living and True God" (I: 100). This is very confusing. How can the knowledge of what we know be different from what we know? Surely Dr. Smith does not mean that our way of knowing is analogical to God's way of knowing. We learn; he doesn't. What he does mean is unclear.

³ Many Christians are offended when Christ is referred to as the Logic of God; yet, that is precisely what John says. See G. H. Clark, *The Johannine Logos*.

Revelation

Commendably, following the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Dr. Smith begins his study of systematics with the study of revelation. He does not begin with "God" alone. Scripture defines God for us. Then too, Smith is a strong advocate of inerrancy. But in his study of general revelation, the author implicitly denies the principle of *sola Scriptura* when he maintains that a study of the universe gives us truth. He writes: "The human mind was made with the capacity for knowledge and is thus able to discover the truth in the revelation contained in the world In other words, man has the capability of arriving at truth as he studies the universe which God has made. . . . God has placed the truth to be learned in the facts of the universe" (I: 34, 35). Isn't it odd that those who attack "mere human logic" also insist that the natural man can discover truth in nature?

Where, we might ask, do we find "facts" or truth in the universe? How are they determined to be true? Does the author intend us to believe that the ever-changing discipline of science gives us truth? Yes, he does; because in a later section of the volume we read: "Though the Bible is not a textbook of science, being God's Word, it must speak truly when it speaks about any subject, including matters studied in science. . . . Since God is truth, and all truth has come from him, whether in the written Word, or in the created universe, all truth must ultimately be in accord. In other words, there is no real reason for any conflict between the Bible and science" (I: 179). And again: "Further, it is not to say that we do not learn truth outside of the Bible, for the whole realm of general revelation is itself the revelation of God, and reflects his truth also. . . . [W]e must acknowledge that the non-Christian mind has brought to light much that we acknowledge to be true, not on his basis, but on ours. This is not less true in the field of psychology than it is in the field of chemistry or physics" (I:244).

Unfortunately, Dr. Smith has adopted the all too prevalent "two-source" theory of truth, wherein it is asserted that science, history, and psychology

furnish men truth in addition to the Word of God.⁴ This contradicts the many statements in Scripture that the wisdom of the world is foolishness. The Bible claims to have a monopoly on truth: "Your Word is truth" (*John* 17:17). As the *Westminster Confession of Faith* says: "The whole counsel of God concerning all things [note the universal "all things"] necessary for his glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing [including science, history, and psychology] at any time is to be added" (1:6).

As to what Smith means when he states that "the Bible is not a textbook of science," this reviewer is not sure. If he means that the Bible is not exclusively about science, then of course he is correct. But if he means that the Bible is not "the authority" and the only genuine textbook on science, then he is wrong. In *2 Timothy* 3:16-17, Paul tells us that the Bible is the only true textbook on any subject, and all other textbooks must conform to it. As to the author's statement that there is never a conflict between the Bible and science, he is correct, albeit for a reason different from what he asserts. The reason that there is never such a conflict is that the Bible is the sole source of truth, and science never gives us truth. As Gordon Clark has pointed out in *The Philosophy of Science and Belief in God*, science is non-cognitive. Hence a conflict is not possible.⁵

Saving Faith and Mysticism

The Greenville theologian's irrational streak is evident in the following statements regarding soteriology: "As we have already seen, saving faith

⁴ Sadly, the present reviewer at one time also adhered to this "two-source" theory, as found in my *The Bible: God's Word* (Journey Publications, 1989). It was shortly after the publication of this book that I came to see the serious error of this view.

⁵ Oddly, Dr. Smith asserts that "empiricism results in skepticism" (I: 34). How then can he be anything but skeptical about the study of science or natural theology? Dr. Smith does at one point say that "What we learn from general revelation comes only as it is seen in the light of the Bible" (I: 36). This being the case, however, we are learning from Scripture, not from the universe.

involves more than the acceptance of a proposition. It involves a person to person relationship of love and communion. . . . Faith *in its essence* is a relation of persons, *not* an acceptance of propositions. It involves propositions, but *its essence* is a relationship of union and communion of love" (II:452, 497) (emphasis added).

Smith is neither neo-orthodox nor liberal, but this is the language of neo-orthodoxy and liberalism. Smith even calls his view "A Proper Christian Mysticism" (II: 496). Smith creates a dichotomy between Christ and his Word. The apostle John, on the other hand, teaches us that Christ is the Word: "In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God" (1:1), and that his words are "Spirit, and they are life" (6:63).

The "essence" of saving faith is not a personal relationship with Christ (Mary certainly had a "personal relationship" with Jesus, but it availed her nothing. Jesus emphasized only the Word: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the Word of God and do it."), unless one means by this cliché that there is a communication of minds between Christ and the elect: "we have the mind of Christ" (*1 Corinthians* 2:16). But the mystics distinguish between persons and ideas. There is no place in Scripture where sinners are urged to have a personal relationship with Christ; the command is to assent to the propositions of Scripture: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved." There is nothing mystical about it.⁶

The Theistic Proofs

Then there is Dr. Smith's view of the "theistic proofs" (I: 121-125). Are they valid? Yes and no, we are told. They are valid if one formulates the "proofs" on the basis of the presupposition of the existence of God; otherwise, they are not. (Yes, this is what the author says.) Of course, if the Christian is formulating his arguments on the basis of the existence of God, then there is no theistic proof at all and no point in constructing the proofs: One has already assumed God's existence. It is tautological

⁶ For more on this subject, see Clark's *Faith and Saving Faith* and *The Johannine Logos*.

to assert that God's existence implies God's existence.

Another blunder is found in the section on God's attributes. Dr. Smith wants to ascribe "emotive" attributes to the triune God of Scripture (I: 141-146). Sadly, other theologians have done the same. But since emotions come and go, that is, they are involuntary, temporary, mental states accompanied by bodily fluctuations, it is obvious that the immutable God of Scripture does not and cannot emote. At best, attributing emotions to God is an uncaredful usage of language. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* correctly states that the God of Scripture is "a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or *passions*" (2:1).

Man

In the section on anthropology, Dr. Smith claims, incredibly, that man's body is part of the image of God. Certainly, this is not the view of Calvin, nor the *Westminster Confession*. Nevertheless, Smith writes: "Since man is the image of God, it is to be expected that he be rational, that he have a will, freedom, personality, etc., corresponding to those attributes of God. The same may even be said of the body. Man has a body because he is the image of God" (I: 238). This is bad enough. But the argument supporting this assertion aggravates the error: "God sees and hears, and man who is his image also sees and hears, but he must have organs with which to do so" (I: 238).

Dr. Smith is neither a materialist nor a Mormon, but this is the language of materialism and Mormonism. As Augustine and Clark pointed out, it is not true that man needs organs to "see and hear." In fact, he doesn't see and hear with the bodily organs at all; it is the person, that is, the mind or spirit, who sees and hears.⁷ If Smith's arguments were correct, then angels could not see and hear; neither could the saints in the intermediate state. Yet the Bible tells us that they do. Moreover, Moses saw and heard Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration, even though his eyes and ears had been in the grave for some 1500

years. The body of man is not the image of God; the spirit, or soul, or mind is. If body is the image, or any part of the image, then animals are the image of God. Further, if by "see" and "hear" Smith means to have images, retinas, and vibrating eardrums, then God neither sees nor hears.

God and Sin

Again, in his analysis of anthropology, dealing with the issue of the origin of sin, Dr. Smith, like so many other theologians, is reluctant to say that God is the cause of sin in the world. He fully admits that "God has ordained that sin should take place in the first place" (I: 294). But when it comes to the matter of "Sin As It Originated in the Creaturely World," he balks. Regarding the fall of Satan, Smith writes: "How a creature who was created holy and good, and who dwelt in the presence of God could turn to sin is something that is not explained. All we know is that this is the case. At this point, all that we can do is acknowledge the mystery of the origin of evil" (I: 295). But the Scripture is very clear: God is the cause of evil in the world. In *Isaiah* 45:7, for example, we read: "I [God] form the light, and create darkness; I make peace and create evil; I the Lord do all these things."

This is certainly the view of the Westminster divines. As explained in the *Confession* (5:2, 4): "Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly: yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes. . . . The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission . . . yet, so as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God, who being most holy and righteous, neither is, nor can be, the author or approver of sin." Among the Scripture passages adduced to support their strong Calvinistic position of divine determinism, the Westminster divines cite *2 Samuel* 24:1; *1 Chronicles* 21:1; *1 Kings* 22:22; *2 Samuel* 16:10; *Acts* 2:23, and *Acts* 4:27. The reader is encouraged to study these passages and ask himself,

⁷ See Gordon H. Clark, *Lord God of Truth*, and Aurelius Augustine, *Concerning the Teacher* (The Trinity Foundation, 1994).

"Where is the mystery?" God is the first cause of all things, including "all sins of angels and men."

Christ

The Greenville theologian is also confused on his doctrine of Christ. In agreement with the Chalcedonian creed, he holds to the traditional view that Jesus Christ is one person with two natures (one divine and the other human). He writes: "There are not two personalities in Christ, but two natures in the one person" (I: 361). Too, he maintains that as touching his human nature, "Christ was truly man" (I: 358). But then Smith adds: "It was the divine person who assumed an impersonal human nature. In other words, he did not unite himself with a human person, but with a human nature" (I: 361). One wonders how Christ can be considered "truly man," like us in every way but sin, and not be a human person. This is a problem that has plagued the traditional position for centuries.

It is also perplexing when we read Smith's statement that "Christ's person may be described as *theanthropic*, but not his natures" (I: 360), just prior to his claim that "it was the divine person, who assumed an impersonal human nature." How is it possible for the divine Second Person of the Godhead, who is immutable, to become "theanthropic"? This is most muddled. For rational solutions to these problems, one should read the last book Gordon Clark ever wrote: *The Incarnation*.

The Decrees of God

Finally, as far as this review is concerned, there is a problem with respect to the logical order of God's decrees. The author correctly maintains that the two main views held by Reformed theologians through the years have been supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism. The former holds that God logically (not temporally) decreed to elect and reprobate prior to his decree to bring about the fall of man. The latter view teaches the reverse, that is, that the decree to bring about the Fall logically precedes the decree to elect and reprobate.

First, it is noted that Smith favorably quotes G. C. Berkouwer, who stated that we must "understand

that the problem of succession in the theological supra and infra is a self-created and therefore insoluble problem which does not touch upon the essential faith of the Church" (I: 175). This reviewer strongly disagrees, because, as we will see, "the problem of succession in the theological supra and infra" has to do with the rationality of God.

Second, in his discussion of this issue, Dr. Smith states that the "great advantage" of infralapsarianism "is that it is closer to the historical order of the events as they have taken place. That is, historically, creation was first, then the fall, and then the distinction is made between men by God" (I: 175). But this order is precisely why infralapsarianism is to be rejected and supralapsarianism adopted. A logical mind first makes a plan (the decrees) and then executes the plan in the reverse order of the decrees. As John Robbins has written: "Once it is understood that God is rational, that he always acts purposefully, the problem of the order of the decrees resolves itself: The order of the decrees is the reverse of the order of their execution."⁸

Morton Smith is a highly respected theologian—one that earnestly desires to further God's Kingdom on Earth. He is staunchly conservative in his approach to doctrinal issues. Most of the two-volume work under discussion is helpful, and the present reviewer has benefited from it. Nevertheless, there are errors, some quite serious, that have been addressed in this review. The major problem is irrationalism. Each matter considered in this discussion, in one way or another, has to do with the need for a rational theology. There is no greater threat facing the church today than that of irrationalism. The Bible teaches us that Jesus Christ is the Logic of God; he is the Wisdom and Reason of God incarnate. And if we are going to do theology in a manner that pleases him, we must embrace the Scriptural ideals of clarity in both thought and speech. Only then will we be able to cast down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and to bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

⁸ "Social Action and Evangelical Order," *The Trinity Review* (January-February, 1982).