

# 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.

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## New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith

Robert L. Reymond

Reviewed by W. Gary Crampton\*

Dr. Robert L. Reymond is Professor of Systematic Theology at Knox Theological Seminary in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He holds B. A., M. A., and Ph. D. degrees from Bob Jones University and has done doctoral and post-doctoral studies in other seminaries and universities. Mr. Reymond, an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America, has lectured in various countries in Europe and the East. Prior to taking the Chair of Systematic Theology at Knox Theological Seminary, he taught at Covenant Theological Seminary for more than twenty years. He has authored numerous articles in theological journals and various reference works, and has written some ten books. To say the least, Mr. Reymond is a well-educated, highly trained, and skilled theologian.

In *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*,<sup>1</sup> Reymond has given the church a comprehensive and contemporary statement of Christian theology. As stated on the dust cover, this book "is saturated with Scripture" and Biblical exegesis, and the author is "always encouraging the reader to measure the theological assertions by the ultimate standard of Scripture itself." In Reymond's own words, "this present volume attempts to set forth a systematic theology of the Christian faith that will pass Biblical muster" (xix). In the opinion of the present reviewer, it does just that. Reymond's book is the best one-volume systematic theology in English.

This is not to say that it is without defect. There are several areas in which it is weak. To cite a few, Dr. Reymond holds to the "critical" or Alexandrian Text theory of New Testament manuscript analysis, rather than the Majority Text view (569n, 575n, 951). Further, he speaks of a form of "non-propositional" revelation (5), a problematic idea, if revelation is the revelation of truth, for truth is a quality of propositions alone. He believes that sensations (whatever they are) play a role in the acquisition of knowledge (147).<sup>2</sup> And more than once he refers to knowledge being justified by means of history and experience (478, 468), whereas Scripture alone is the sole means of justifying knowledge, a truth which Reymond himself attests to, both in this book (111-126), and, in much greater detail, in another volume as well.<sup>3</sup> These glitches (and two others that will be dealt with below), however, should be viewed as mere aberrations in an otherwise outstanding work.

Dr. Reymond, unapologetically Reformed and Calvinistic in his thinking, is a strong adherent to the Westminster Standards. He follows the theological outline of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in this volume. After the "Introduction," one section of which—"The Justification of Theology as an Intellectual Discipline"—is worth the price of the

<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998). The pagination found in this review is from Reymond's book.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this subject and Gordon Clark's refutation of Reymond's position, see Gordon H. Clark, *Clark Speaks from the Grave* (The Trinity Foundation, 1986), 19-30.

<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976).

book itself, Part One studies Scripture ("Bibliology"); Part Two assesses the doctrines of God ("Theology Proper") and man ("Anthropology"); Part Three deals with the Covenant of Grace, the doctrine of the Person and work of Christ ("Christology"), and salvation ("Soteriology"); Part Four examines the church ("Ecclesiology"); and Part Five inquires into the last things ("Eschatology"). The volume concludes with seven Appendices, including a "Selected General Theological Bibliography." In each and every one of the sections, Reymond, in a very scholarly fashion, interacts with various opinions of scholars of antiquity and the present era.

Like Calvin and the Westminster Assembly, Reymond begins his treatise with epistemology (the theory of knowledge). He does not begin with how we know there is a god, and then go on to seek to prove that this god is the God of the Bible. (In fact, in chapter six the author reviews the "Traditional Proofs" for God's existence and shows them all to be fallacious [132-152].) He begins with revelation. The doctrine of God follows epistemology.

Further, Reymond's approach to Scripture is presuppositional, in Clarkian (not Van Tilian) fashion. There is no higher proof than God's infallible, inerrant Word. It is the *pou sto* ("[a place] where I may stand") for all knowledge. Says the author: "When God gave his Word to us, he gave us much more than simply basic information about himself. He gave us the *pou sto*, or base that justifies both our knowledge claims and our claims to personal significance" (111).

To his credit, Robert Reymond will have nothing to do with a paradoxical theology. As a breath of fresh air, he calls for a rational theology (103-110). This is not a Cartesian rationalism, which is free from Biblical revelation, presupposing the autonomy of human reason. Rather, it is a Christian rationalism, as espoused by men such as Augustine, John Calvin, B. B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen, and Gordon Clark. It is a Biblical view that claims that "God is rational...[and] this means that he thinks and speaks in a way that indicates the laws of logic...are laws of thought original with and intrinsic to himself" (109). Hence, God's "inscripturated propositional revelation to us--the Holy Scripture--is of necessity also rational" (110). Without such a rational theology, the systematizing of Scripture would be impossible.

Moreover, due to the nature of Biblical truth, that is, that it is rational, we are to understand that God's revelation to us is "univocally true." Here the author correctly takes issue with Cornelius Van Til (96-102) and John Frame (and his "multiperspectival" approach to theology [103]), both of whom maintain that Biblical revelation is analogical. What we have in Scripture, says Reymond, is not just an analogy of the truth. We have the truth itself. Since God is omniscient (knowing all truth), if we are to know anything, we must know what God knows. Necessarily, then, there is an univocal point at which our knowledge meets God's knowledge. To be sure, man does not know as much as God knows, that is, he does not have the same degree of knowledge as God does, but he has the same kind of knowledge (95-102).

Commendably, in the face of so much controversy in our day over the issue of the "spiritual gifts" and the canon of Scripture, the author is a strong advocate of the Confessional view<sup>4</sup>: the gifts have ceased and the canon is closed. (In this section, Reymond corrects Wayne Grudem's teaching that prophecy is a legitimate gift for the church today [57].) In his *What About Continuing Revelations and Miracles in the Presbyterian Church Today*,<sup>5</sup> a book wholly devoted to this subject (which the reader is encouraged to study for further insight on this matter), Reymond effectively presents his case in greater detail, efficiently dismantling the opposing view. Particularly relevant is his exegesis and analysis of *1 Corinthians* 13:8-13, a passage in which Paul deals with, not the second advent and the final state, but the cessation of the spiritual gifts and the close of the canon.

Part Two ("God and Man"), like the rest of the book, is excellent. But several things should be highlighted. First, the author adheres to a literal six-day creation and a relatively young Earth. He writes: "I can discern no reason...for departing from the view that the days of *Genesis* were ordinary twenty-four hour days" (392); "the tendency of Scripture...seems to be toward a relative young Earth and a relatively short history of man to date" (396).

<sup>4</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* I: 1, 2, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *What About Continuing Revelations and Miracles in the Presbyterian Church Today?* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1977).

Second, Reymond argues against the traditional view of "The Eternal Generation of the Son" (324-341), showing that it is (at least) implicitly subordinationistic. He analyzes the writings of the Nicene Fathers, revealing how their uncaredful use of language, as well as their misuse or misunderstanding of the Greek *monogenes* ("only begotten"), led to this subordinationist view. Reymond buttresses his position by citing Calvin at length. The conclusion reached is that "John Calvin contended against the subordinationism implicit in the Nicene language" (327).

Third, Dr. Reymond's "A Biblical Theodicy" ("the justification of God in the face of the existence of evil"), is very well done (376-378). In summary: "The ultimate end which God decreed he regarded as great enough and glorious enough that it justified to himself both the divine plan itself and the ordained incidental evil arising along the foreordained path to his plan's great and glorious end" (377). To his merit, the author does not "duck" the Biblical truth, so aptly stated by the *Westminster Confession*, that "the almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extends itself even to the first Fall, and all other sins of angels and men."<sup>6</sup>

In this section we do, however, encounter another glitch; it has to do with the author's teaching regarding "God and time." The traditional or Augustinian view is that "time is the succession of ideas in a finite mind" (173); hence, God is to be viewed as "timeless" in his being. Reymond demurs. He opts for the term "everlasting" when referring to God, rather than "eternal." The purpose: This suggests that God dwells in everlasting or eternal time, not eternal timelessness. Reymond properly contends that although God does not have a succession of ideas, he does, nevertheless, have an idea of succession. But somehow he maintains that this is not logically possible under the traditional view. The present reader disagrees with the author and suggests that a more Biblical approach to this matter is to be found in Gordon Clark's chapter on "Time

and Eternity" in the first edition of his book *God's Hammer*.<sup>7</sup>

Part Three ("Our 'So Great Salvation' ") begins with "God's Eternal Plan of Salvation" (461). Here the author forcefully (and convincingly) argues in favor of a supralapsarian view (that God logically [not chronologically] decreed to elect and reprobate prior to his decree to bring about the Fall of man) of the logical order of the decrees, rather than the infralapsarian view (that God logically decreed to bring about the fall of man prior to his decree to elect and reprobate). God, writes Reymond, "has a single eternal purpose or plan at the center of which is Jesus Christ and his church" (465). Or, in other words, God's singly eternal plan is redemptive in nature: "Creation's *raison d'être* then is to serve the redemptive ends of God" (398).

This being the case, the logical order of the decrees must begin, not with the creation of the world and all men, as infralapsarians would have it (480), but with "the election of some sinful men to salvation in Christ" (489). Whereas infralapsarians maintain that their view is correct because it is closer to the historical order of the events as they take place, the supralapsarian disagrees. A rational mind, of which God's is the epitome, first makes a plan (the decrees) and then executes the plan in the reverse order of the decrees (492-496). Thus, the logical order of the decrees is not just a matter of theological hairsplitting, as some would contend. The rationality of God is at stake. And Reymond has expounded for us the Biblical position.

As mentioned above, prior to studying the doctrine of Christ, the author examines "The Unity of the Covenant of Grace" (503-541). He then goes on to explore Christology, including "The Supernatural Christ of History" (545-581) and "The Christ of the Early Councils" (583-622). The historical theology discussed in this latter section is superb. It is here, however, that we encounter another problem. Reymond affirms the traditional view of the incarnation and the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ, as stated in the Chalcedonian Creed. That is, that "the eternal Son of God took into union with himself in the one divine

<sup>6</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* V: 4.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *God's Hammer: The Bible and Its Critics* (The Trinity Foundation, 1982), 175-190.

Person that which he had not possessed before--even a full complex of human attributes--and became fully and truly man for us men and for our salvation" (546). But if Christ is now one divine Person, with two natures (one divine and one human), as clearly averred by Chalcedon, how can it be said that he "became fully and truly man?" In other words, if he is not a human person, is he fully man? How does this teaching square with *Hebrews 2* which asserts that Christ, having "partaken of flesh and blood" (verse 14) has now "in all things" been "made like his brethren" (verse 17)? This problem has plagued the traditional view for centuries. For rational solutions to these problems, the reader should study the last book Gordon Clark ever wrote: *The Incarnation*.<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Reymond completes his study of Christology with an analysis of Christ's "cross work" and the limited atonement (Reymond prefers the term "particular redemption"), from a Calvinistic perspective (623-702). Once again, his work is exemplary.

Part Three concludes with a study of "The Application of the Benefits of the Cross Work of Christ" (703-794); that is, the order in which the salvation merited by Christ is applied to the elect (the *ordo salutis*), from "effectual calling" through "glorification." Particularly laudable in this section is the author's strong stand against the Roman Catholic Church and its false teachings. Dr. Reymond does not minimize the difference that exists between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Rather, he sharply criticizes the "Evangelical and Catholics Together" movement that (sadly) is gaining a foothold in the allegedly Protestant camp. With Paul and the Reformers, the author claims that Rome's gospel is "another gospel which is no gospel at all" (734n).

In Part Four ("The Church") Reymond sets forth a Biblical Ecclesiology. In "The Nature and Foundation of the Church," he studies this doctrine from a "Biblical theological" standpoint, that is, how it historically unfolds, beginning in the Old Testament and continuing into the New (805-836). The writings of all of the New Testament authors are considered in some detail. The author then goes on to examine "The Attributes and Marks of the Church" (837-862),

<sup>8</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *The Incarnation* (The Trinity Foundation, 1988).

stressing "faithfulness to and the pure and true proclamation of the Word of God" (851), and "The Authority and Duties of the Church" (861-893), again pressing home the fact "that the church must ever be committed to the study, the preaching, and the teaching of the Word of God" (878). Reymond's teaching in this latter section on the "regulative principle" of worship (868-877), that is, that "true worship may include only those matters which God has either expressly commanded in Scripture or which may be deduced from Scripture by good and necessary consequence" (870),<sup>9</sup> is particularly refreshing. This is especially the case in a day when we see so many alleged Reformed scholars denying this Scriptural duty of worship. Reymond takes issue with J. I. Packer in this matter, because Packer rejects the regulative principle, calling it a "Puritan innovation." States Reymond: "Whatever else one might say about this [regulative] principle, it must be said it is not a Puritan innovation, Calvin having stated that 'whatever is not commanded, we are not free to choose' " (870n). He then goes on to explore the Biblical view of church government.

Dr. Reymond is a Presbyterian, and presents his case for this form of government with Biblical thoroughness (895-910). In so doing he exposes the errors in Episcopacy, Congregationalism, and Erastianism. Part Four ends with "The Church's Means of Grace" (911-976), wherein the author deals with Scripture (as a means of grace in itself), and the Sacraments and prayer (which are means of grace only as understood and applied by and with the Word of God). Once again, noteworthy is Reymond's strong stance on Scripture as "the most important of the means of grace available to the church" (913).

Finally, Reymond gives us an impressive Biblical "Eschatology" (979-1093). First, he investigates five eschatological theories that have surfaced over the last one hundred and fifty years: the Liberal Eschatology of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Consistent Eschatology of Albert Schweitzer, the

<sup>9</sup> The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (XXI: 1) defines the regulative principle as follows: "The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture."

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Realized Eschatology of C. H. Dodd, the Existentialist Eschatology of Rudolf Bultmann, and the eschatological views of Dispensationalism. All of these are heretical (in greater and lesser degrees) in one form or another. And Reymond dispenses with them in short order. He concludes: "With such eschatological confusion running rampant today in scholarly circles, never has the need been greater to return to Scripture and to see what God's Word says concerning this vital, all-important, capstoning locus of theology" (986).

The author proceeds to do just that. He begins in the Old Testament, which eschatologically views the coming of God's kingdom as an undivided unit. But then when we come to the New Testament, we find that this kingdom unfolds itself in two stages. The first stage is one of grace, whereas the second is one of glory. Reymond traces this theme, beginning with John the Baptist, and continuing in the ministry of Christ and his kingdom parables, and then through the balance of the New Testament writings. He trenchantly argues his case that a proper Biblical eschatology must hold to what he calls an "eschatological dualism," espousing both the "already" of an inaugurated kingdom, and the "not yet" of a future cosmic kingdom of glory, which will be ushered in at the second advent of Jesus Christ. In the author's own words: "Old Testament eschatology pointed forward both to today's 'now' (soterically oriented) eschatology and to the 'not yet' (consummating) eschatology of the age to come that will commence with Jesus' return, but eschatological clarity awaited Jesus' prophetic insights to distinguish these two ages" (1064). And within this Biblical eschatological framework there is no room for a 1000-year reign of Christ on Earth. In other words, according to Reymond (and here he differs from the historic premillennial view of Reformed thinkers such as John Gill, Charles Spurgeon, Francis Schaeffer, and Gordon Clark), a Premillennial eschatology cannot be supported by the teaching of Scripture. He writes: "All of the New Testament writings project the same eschatological vision; none of them teaches that a millennial age should be inserted between Jesus' 'this age' and 'the age to come' (*Matthew* 12:32) (1064).

Dr. Reymond calls himself an Amillennialist, but some might say that he sounds more like a Postmillennialist. The reason: Although he sees no

"golden age" prior to the final state, he appears to be very optimistic about the spread of the Gospel during the present kingdom ("this age") reign of Christ.

Robert Reymond has done the church a great service. In a day when Reformed theology has fallen on hard times, even within our allegedly Reformed and Calvinistic seminaries, Dr. Reymond has given us a Biblically based, Confessionally sound systematic theology. In it he calls the church to a Scripturally grounded theology, a rational theology, a God-centered theology, and a theologically articulate ministry.<sup>10</sup> It is the hope of the present reviewer that the Reformed church will pay heed to this four-fold call. Thank you, Dr. Reymond, for your contribution to the advancement of Christ's kingdom.

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<sup>10</sup> For more on this four-fold call, see Robert L. Reymond, *Preach the Word: A Teaching Ministry Approved unto God* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1988).