

Anthony C. Thiselton. *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007. 649 pages. \$46.

Interpreters of the Bible do not engage pristine texts. We read them through the kaleidoscopic glasses of a multicolored history of interpretation, of most of which we are generally unaware. We become aware of the traditions that have shaped us, whether or not we identify them as such, when we encounter a perspective that contrasts with our own. Or we discover them when we engage in a form of study that reveals to us our family roots.

This volume by Anthony Thiselton treats the awesomely rich history of Biblical interpretation from the point of view of the varied answers that have arisen as Christians have encountered each other with conflicting answers to those questions. His driving motivation for producing this study is the desire to offer Christians an alternative to the widespread attitude that doctrine is a system of beliefs to which we assent if we are Christians that has little or nothing to do with how we live our daily lives. On the contrary, responds Thiselton, doctrines are the offspring of the “Questions that arise” (Gadamer) as Christians engage the Bible and each other over the deep truths of their lives. This means that beliefs are not simply ideas to be accepted. They are multilayered dispositions to be understood by listening to the life questions that produced them. This necessitates a careful and sympathetic reading of the writings of those who formulated various versions of the major doctrines over the centuries: an investigation of the historical context of those writers; and an evaluation of their formulations in relation to the Bible, to each other, and to our present-day sense of truth. In other words, doctrines need to be interpreted, not facilely accepted, employing the same resources we bring to bear on Biblical texts. They are part of the fabric of our thinking and our living, whether we are aware of them or not. Consequently a study of Christian doctrine as a demanding labor in understanding is not a luxury for armchair theoreticians. And it is intimately related to our efforts to interpret the Bible.

Thiselton devotes the first third of the book to the nature and role of doctrine in human communities, in the life of Israel, of the Christian Church, and among more recent western philosophers and theologians and scientists. He reviews recent discussion leading to the view that doctrine has to do with life’s questions and the way beliefs dispose us to certain behaviors. They form us; we embody them; we come into conflict with each other over them, and our lives may become enriched through those conflicts.

In the latter two thirds of the volume Thiselton leads us through the history of the major doctrines of the Christian faith: the human condition in relation to creation; our bodily and temporal life; our relationships with others; the varied ways we do wrong; different understandings of Jesus and salvation, the nature of God; the meaning of the church and its ministry and worship; and the promise and nature of our future. His approach is the same as that which major seminaries and divinity schools teach for interpreting the Bible. At every point in history, we must try to understand the historical circumstances of those who articulated a particular doctrine, listen carefully to what they said in relation to those circumstances, strive to discern what was most important to them, and only then evaluate what they said in relation to the Bible and our own life’s circumstances and questions. Approaching doctrine this way, we will no doubt be in for some surprises. We will become more aware of an understanding of our own beliefs and dispositions, and we come upon some new dimensions of a life question or develop a new appreciation of a proposed answer we had rejected.

Here is one example. Anselm of Canterbury's "satisfaction" theory of the atonement has been the target of heavy criticism in liberal theological circles. Thiselton invites us to "first listen, then explore the horizons of understanding within which Anselm's questions make best sense, and then attempt to evaluate his approach in relation to the New Testament, to the history of Christian doctrine, and to the coherence of truth as it developed up to today" (360-361). He first reviews Anselm's *Why God Became Man* (*Cur Deus Homo*), noting things like Anselm's hesitancy to offer an answer to Boso's question captured in the title of the book, his preference for laying down certain axioms that lead to an answer, his use of the word "must" not in the sense of external compulsion but of internal consistency on God's part, God's need for justice in relation to his need to be honored, his commitment to those who have offended his honor, and his solution to the dilemma the offense creates for that commitment. Thiselton then reviews the critiques and defenses of Anselm in recent times (he saves some of this for his discussion of Abelard in the following section). Major objections have included Anselm's use of feudal analogies that are no longer relevant and that generate a hierarchical view of God and the repulsive idea that God is a God whose demand for justice is such that God will not pardon apart from the blood of an innocent victim.

Thiselton argues that these objections have become distractions that block us from understanding what Anselm is really trying to do and the enduring value of his exposition. Anselm's major concern is not abstract justice but the relation between creator and creature. God is committed to an authentic partnership between the divine self and human beings. God's dilemma is how to maintain that in the light of human sin over against the need to maintain the divine commitment to justice. Some modern approaches have too easily swept God's need for justice aside when it comes to the doctrine of the atonement, while advocating it passionately when it comes to a host of modern issues. We might do well to understand Anselm's use of the analogy to feudal social and political structures as a parable drawn from the life of his listeners that includes the basic elements of the problem he is trying to solve without being a perfect fit when applied to God. As with the illustrations employed by preachers today, it is vulnerable to misinterpretation, necessary if we are going to communicate, but dangerous in its power to say too much. If we can manage to put aside our personal baggage in response to Anselm's language along with our cultural propensity to take offense, if we strive first to listen as sympathetically as we can, give him the benefit of recognizing that his analogy has weaknesses that come with the territory but are not part of what he wants to say, then perhaps we can hear him as a thinker worthy of respect as we enter into dialogue with what he has bequeathed to us. He does not say it all, and some of what he does say needs to be disregarded as irrelevant to his point. He needs to be forgiven his errors and accorded the benefit of the doubt in light of the fact he is no longer here to respond to our question and objections. In the end, if we accord him the respect of deep listening, we might learn something from him. This may be difficult in light of the damage done by people who have taken up his words and perhaps distorted his intention. But regard for the marginalized is a big theme in theology today. Perhaps we should accord that regard to those we have marginalized ourselves. Our doctrine about that is that it would be to our benefit (360-365).

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