

REVIEWS

Aquinas, Calvin and Contemporary Protestant Thought

Arvin Vos

Exeter, Paternoster Press, 1985, xviii + 178 pp., £9.95

This is a careful, clear exposition of a historical issue which lies at the heart of the philosophy of religion, the nature of Christian apologetics and the history of Christian thought — the intellectual relationship between Aquinas, the central figure of mediaeval Catholicism, and John Calvin the Reformer, who rarely mentions him.

Most Protestants believe that Aquinas bases all theology on the ability to prove God's existence by reason apart from revelation whereas Calvin was a fideist; that Aquinas believed in a realm of 'autonomous' nature with grace superadded and lost at the Fall. Such grace returns in Christ but nature retains her autonomy and bids to be completely secular, while grace is an irrational 'frosting'. Popular presenters of the Christian faith such as Francis Schaeffer believed this is what has actually happened, in a pervasive way, in modern culture, and that there can only be reintegration when culture is placed once again on a fully Christian, that is, biblical basis. Vos is convinced that much of this is caricature, the result of word of mouth tradition rather than of a proper appreciation of the sources.

Like a good lawyer, by patient and clear exposition of Aquinas (less so of Calvin), Vos casts reasonable doubt on these and other traditional and influential claims. He shows, for example, that Aquinas' proofs of the existence of God, extracted from his texts and given great prominence in every philosophy of religion anthology and seminar-room, in fact play a subsidiary and subordinate role in Aquinas' system of thought. While Aquinas holds that it is *possible* for those who have the necessary capability to prove the existence of God, and so to know that God exists, such proof is not necessary for faith, which is founded upon the word of God and falls short of knowledge (55-6). This makes Aquinas almost as much a fideist as Calvin for both of whom faith is based upon evidence yet goes beyond evidence, trusting where it cannot see. (Yet since Aquinas holds that some knowledge of God is gained by philosophers he is not a fideist in the sense of someone who believes that faith alone provides us with whatever knowledge of God there is).

Those contemporary philosophers such as Plantinga and Wolterstorff who argue that Aquinas is an evidentialist but Calvin is not and that a consistently Reformed view of faith and reason requires that one *begin* with God's existence are in Vos's view highlighting an antithesis which is not there, not, at least, in the great historical figures to which they appeal. Their position is unwittingly that of Aquinas (93) who far from exalting natural theology stresses its limitations (96).

Or take the question of the relation between nature and grace. How frequently has it been said that according to the 'mediaeval synthesis' grace perfects (autonomous) nature. Vos provides evidence to cast doubt on the view that this is Aquinas' position. Far from nature being autonomous it is God's creation and man, made in the image of God, has a natural desire to know God (Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*?) The Fall makes man incapable of true virtue, though according to

Aquinas he is capable of 'virtue in a limited sense', a view akin to what the Reformers, e.g. Luther, referred to as 'civic righteousness'. According to Aquinas fallen man remains a rational animal and in this he is unaffected by the Fall, but he cannot by his own powers gain his true end, but needs grace. Man without grace is inclined to virtue but impotent to carry out his inclinations (145), a distinction which is echoed in Calvin (*Inst.* 2.2.15). Vos does not say it, but does not the Calvinist distinction, prominent since Abraham Kuyper, between common and special grace, differ only semantically from Aquinas' distinction between nature and grace, granted his fideism?

Whether the disability that according to Aquinas results from the Fall corresponds to the full Pauline and Augustinian position of the bondage of the will to sin, re-emphasised at the Reformation, is something into which Vos understandably does not go, any more than he questions Aquinas' (and Augustine's) view that justification consists in the infusing of righteousness into the soul and not the imputation of righteousness for Christ's sake. But following Henri de Lubac he does conjecture that the conventional Protestant view is more an account of Cajetan than of Aquinas (154), a product of the Counter-Reformation.

Vos more than once alludes to Calvin's distinction between earlier mediaeval and later scholastic philosophy and theology (37,169; see *Inst.* 2.2.6, 3.11/15). In a study which shows command not only of the relevant texts but also of contemporary philosophical issues — a rare combination — there is reason to think that Vos has provided an estimate of Thomas in line with Calvin's distinction.

Those who have argued that what follows Calvin, namely Puritanism and scholastic Reformed theology, is doctrinally in accord with Calvin himself, have in Vos an unexpected ally. For if it is reasonable to argue that Calvin's relation to the Angelic Doctor is more continuous than has been thought then this is another reason to suppose a natural continuity after Calvin when, after a humanist and biblical interlude, theology is once again deployed using an Aristotelian outlook. On this view what Calvin objected to (and was in any case, by training and temperament, unable to provide) was not the use of Aristotelian categories but the obscuring of the biblical message of God's grace in Christ by the later scholastic writers, and the resulting powerlessness of the church to bind up the brokenhearted.

This book is an exercise in ecumenical theology of the best kind. It is written in a plain, direct style, free of jargon and of the impedimenta of scholarship. A book to be read and pondered.

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The Covenants of Promise: a Theology of the Old Testament Covenants

T. E. McComiskey

Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1985, 259 pp. \$10-95.

The central thesis of this book, which stands, and is well-read, in the tradition of conservative Reformed theology, is that redemptive history is marked by the ratification of a succession of covenants, namely the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic and the New Covenant. There is in each covenant a 'bicoventantal' structure. This

is constructed on the one hand by the promise-covenant made with Abraham and his offspring, which is 'an eternal covenant that never loses its force or integrity', and on the other by a series of 'administrative' covenants (Mosaic law etc.). These function together to govern human obedience and administer the inheritance promised to God's people (p.10). The promissory covenant (which the author also calls the covenant of grace) is held to be still (and eternally) valid, while the New Covenant, as expressed chiefly in Jeremiah and Hebrews, is the administrative covenant which is currently in force. The argument of the book proceeds by tracing the elements in God's covenant with Abraham through the sequence of administrative covenants. The promise of offspring, for example, is treated at length, as it is found in the promise to David (2 Sam. 7) and in the prophetic corpus, where it issues in Messianic expectation, until it is finally interpreted of Christ in the New Testament. Gal. 3:16-18 is found to be of crucial importance here. In interpreting it, McComiskey rejects Hodge's distinction between a covenant of grace (that of God with his people) and a covenant of redemption (that of the Father with the Son), preferring to see Christ (like Abraham) as both recipient and mediator of the promise (p. 186). For McComiskey the category of promise renders what he sees as Hodge's bifurcation of the covenant unnecessary.

The other elements of the promise to Abraham are similarly treated, most interestingly in the case of the land, where Romans 4:13 is said to furnish grounds for a residual territorial dimension to this aspect of the promise. Nevertheless the author comes close to spiritualizing the Christian's 'landedness' (p.206), while on the other hand (and on little or no exegetical grounds) the existence of a Jewish state today is said to be 'an earnest of the future conquest of the world by Christ' (p.208). As will be clear the author is not afraid to carry his argument deep into the New Testament, and this is most obvious in two appendices, embodied in the work (pp.94-137) and presented as integral, on the law in the teaching of Jesus and Paul respectively.

I found the general stance and many individual arguments (e.g. on the meaning of the promise of blessing to the Gentiles and on the New Covenant) congenial and interesting. I have some reservations about the book. First, it is unnecessarily lengthy and repetitive (and therefore not an enjoyable read). Secondly, there is a tendency in the exegesis to overload certain texts. An example is the brief treatment of Gen. 3:14-19, where with no discussion the serpent is taken to represent Satan and the seed of the woman the godly line (p.191). This is certainly traditional orthodox theology, but the idea that that, and that alone, is what the text really 'means', misses much of what it has to say. Texts are thus sometimes seen as ciphers for meanings which are actually provided by a grander theological system. This is not always so, but there is a curious unevenness here.

Finally, and most importantly, I am not convinced by the distinction, fundamental to the argument, between promissory and administrative covenants. The intention which inspires the distinction is to accommodate both the permanency and the conditionality of covenant. The promissory covenant is thus unconditional, while the administrative covenants provide stipulations. However, the basic argument for the unconditionality of promissory covenants is circular — they are identified by the absence of stipulations (p.140) — and the distinction sometimes produces forced exegesis. This is nowhere more evident than in the treatment of the 'covenant of works', where, while the basic idea is accepted, it is

not called a covenant, because Adam is given no promise (except that of death in case of disobedience). The author opts therefore for an 'administration' of works — though this seems to introduce confusion into his general nomenclature (p.219). It seems to me to be pedantic to reject the idea of promise to Adam, since the whole world evidently lay at his feet. This is not the only place where the distinction is forced (cf. pp.152 f.). It is better to see covenant as an undivided concept, having elements of both promise and condition. These elements often produce deep tension, even agony (cf. Hosea 11:8ff). There is little sense of this in McComiskey's rather clinical treatment, in which he has done precisely what he accused Hodge of doing, namely bifurcated the concept of covenant.

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Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans

Martin Luther

trans. J. Theodore Mueller

Grand Rapids, Kregel Publications, 1982; 223 pp., n.p.

This is a reprint of a work first published in 1954, and consists of a popular, abridged translation of Luther's university lectures on Romans. These were delivered in 1515-16, but were not accessible to the world until they were published in 1908. Their importance was immediately acknowledged, and they became a major stimulus of a renaissance of Luther studies. They constitute perhaps the most significant source for a study of Luther's early theological development. Luther had by this time already attained his pivotal new understanding of justification by faith. Indeed, the brevity of his comment in these lectures on Romans 1:17 suggests that his new insight had come to him somewhat earlier. While rooted in the world of mediaeval hermeneutics, the lectures amply attest the revolution in the teaching of theology that Luther was bringing to the birth.

This digest is unfortunately not much help to any study of Luther's developing thought. For this purpose Wilhelm Pauck's translation in the *Library of Christian Classics* (vol. XV, 1961) remains the only English version. Professor Mueller has prefaced his abridgement with Luther's Preface to Romans in his German New Testament of 1522 (here wrongly dated as 1552. The back cover confuses this Preface with the lectures themselves.) But he nowhere indicates the criteria he followed in his abridgement, and all one can regard it as offering is his version of 'the fundamentals of Luther's evangelical teachings', as he puts it, with no particular reference to 1515-16. Mueller has inserted in brackets in italic words, phrases and sentences with the aim of 'bringing out Luther's meaning more clearly'. While many such additions do thus clarify, others seem unnecessary or even misleading, and they often serve to soften the sharpness of Luther's own statements. A further strange feature of the book is the unexplained inclusion of the AV (KJV) as the biblical text Luther is apparently explaining. The end result is a volume which has value as an account of Luther's evangelical biblical interpretation but which cannot give us access to the Luther of 1515-16.

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