

BOOK REVIEWS

A Bible Handbook to the Acts of the Apostles, Mal Couch, Gen ed. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999. 455 pp. \$25.99.

Dispensationalist commentaries on the crucial book of Acts are few and generally quite brief; thus a 455-page contribution to this field raises considerable interest. The volume is not called a commentary, but a handbook, a somewhat nebulous designation that reveals little about its contents. The reader will find the book comprised of three parts, the first and second being a collection of essays on eight topics within Acts: introduction, the church, the person of Jesus Christ, use of prophecy, demonology, Paul, the temple, and two chapters on the Holy Spirit. Part three is a 223-page verse-by-verse commentary on the book of Acts. The commentary is followed by four appendices: a timeline and three topical essays: one each on the laying on of hands, sign gifts, and progressive dispensationalism as they relate to the book of Acts. The volume is compiled from the research of twelve contributors, most with ties to Tyndale Theological Seminary (Fort Worth, TX), the conservative offspring of Dallas Theological Seminary. The general editor, Mal Couch, is founder, president, and director of the department of theological studies at Tyndale.

The value of the work is severely restricted by a litany of distracting editorial glitches. As in Couch's earlier editorial effort, *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), there are numerous typographical errors. The endnotes (problems in and of themselves for the serious academic reader) are also littered with mistakes. Endnotes 3–9 of the introduction are out of order, and part 2, chapters 1–2, are mislabeled as chapters 8–9. The notes themselves are frequently incomplete, leaving the already frustrated endnote-seeker even further distracted. For instance, chapter 1, n. 16 (p. 425) reads, "Stanley Toussaint and Charles Dyer, *Pentecost Essays* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 24." The reader is forced to do a bit of detective work to discover that the note should read, "Stanley D. Toussaint, 'The Kingdom and Matthew's Gospel,' in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. Stanley D. Toussaint & Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody, 1986), p. 24." Many readers will be unable to find the work as cited. Finally, reprint editions are frequently listed without reference to their original publication, leaving the false impression that the writers are interacting with recently published materials.

There are also numerous internal problems in the book. Overlapping and duplication of topics (e.g., sign gifts and their cessation—pp. 37–42; 64–69; 169–175; 412–16) are frequent. Further, when several contributors worked together on some chapters, they made little attempt to harmonize their findings, resulting in disconnected discussions and conflicting conclusions. For instance, within twelve pages one finds the following three statements: (1) “It is probably best to take the statement [the “rock” of Matt 16:18] at face value as an actual reference to Peter” (p. 46). (2) “It [the “rock” of Matt 16:18] certainly is not pointing back to the apostle Peter!...the church is to be built upon the person of Christ, not upon the disciple Peter” (p. 53). (3) “Most church fathers believed that...the rock has to do with Peter’s confession of who Jesus really is. It is upon this confession that the church will be built” (p. 57). Ironically, the final reference is accompanied by a stern reminder that a given passage can have only one meaning. That an editor could miss this glaring inconsistency is bewildering.

There also seems to be a hesitancy in the volume to give credit to the Grace Seminary (Winona Lake, IN) school of dispensational theology. For instance, while there seems to be a general acceptance of Alva J. McClain’s view of the kingdom within the volume (pp. 21–23; 85–88), credit for the view is given only to Stanley Toussaint. The seminal source, McClain’s *Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), is never cited. Likewise, when discussing the new covenant (p. 89) the author takes the view and even the terminology of Homer A. Kent Jr.,¹ but declines to cite anyone at all. Later in the book (pp. 421–23), when the new covenant is discussed under a separate heading, credit for Kent’s view is given entirely to Scofield’s less than fully developed view. This is odd in light of the book’s tendency to over-citation, often of unnecessary and obscure sources. The reader is left with the impression that the authors view Dallas Theological Seminary and her children as the sole guardians of dispensational theology.

Other examples of DTS influence include the denial of regeneration and Holy Spirit indwelling prior to Pentecost (pp. 19–20, 122–123, 134–35, 139–40), and the necessary corollary that faith precedes regeneration within the *ordo salutis* (pp. 123, 135, 140). Going an alarming step beyond the traditional Dallas view on this issue, the authors cite favorably Lenski’s Arminian comments on Acts 13:48, effectively

¹“The New Covenant and the Church,” *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (Fall 1985): 289–98; also his *Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), pp. 158–160. Cf. R. Bruce Compton, “An Examination of the New Covenant in the Old and New Testaments” (Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1986); Rodney J. Decker, “The Church’s Relationship to the New Covenant,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (July–September 1995): 290–305; (October–December 1995): 431–56.

denying divine election in the verse (pp. 237–38; note, however, conflicting comments on pp. 310–11). Repentance is viewed as a mere “change of mind” (p. 212), though Simon’s conversion (8:13) is viewed as disingenuous (p. 265). The authors deny the possibility of absolute principles of church polity and elder selection, yet advocate the necessity of the plurality of elders (pp. 48–49).

This is not to say that the *Handbook* is without value. The dual adoption of McClain’s view of the kingdom and Kent’s view of the new covenant is to be applauded. The discussions of tongues and sign gifts were good, and the authors go on record in declaring that these gifts have ceased (pp. 173–75, 414). Incidentally, the authors take the unusual stance that the 1 Cor 13:10 reference to the “perfect thing” is a reference to both the closing of the canon *and* the second coming of Christ (p. 415). The discussion of the Sabbath (pp. 60–63) is likewise excellent, though one wonders why the argument was not sealed by referencing Romans 14:5–8. The demonstration of the distinction between Israel and the church in the book of Acts (pp. 63–64) was succinct and convincing. The authors’ speculations concerning the continued early Christian recognition of the temple and its ordinances (pp. 109–118) are also informative. The final appendix denouncing progressive dispensationalism (pp. 417–23), while brief, confirms for the reader that the authors tolerate no shift toward covenant theology.

The commentary section itself is also profitable, giving readers a fresh dispensational survey of the all-important book of Acts. Greek and Hebrew terms are kept to a minimum, and always appear as English transliterations; nor do the writers labor excessively over textual or source criticism. Background material, maps, and a timeline also assist the reader in sorting out the chronological, geographical, and historical aspects so critical to the understanding of the book of Acts. As such, this non-technical commentary is helpful for both scholar and novice.

In summary, much of the information collected in the *Bible Handbook to the Acts of the Apostles* is profitable and, if carefully arranged, could have constituted a valuable contribution to a needy field within dispensationalism. It is unfortunate that such a worthy cause was hampered and valuable research squandered due to something so ancillary as poor organization, harmonization, and editorial work. A comprehensive, dispensational treatment of the book of Acts remains to be written.

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A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith, by Robert L. Reymond. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998. 1210 pp. \$44.99.

Robert L. Reymond, professor of systematic theology at Knox Theological Seminary for the past eight years and at Covenant Theological Seminary for the previous twenty-two, has provided us an eminently worthy systematic theology destined to carve out for itself a niche on the most accessible shelf in many a biblical scholar's library. In an era where "suggestive theology" is becoming more and more the rule, Reymond sets forth a theology that is undeniably and refreshingly dogmatic. More importantly he amasses a formidable array of Scripture to justify his dogmatism—any critic will necessarily wade through a great amount of Scripture before positing disagreement with his conclusions. Reymond has also interacted with a large corpus of historical and contemporary theological literature, and especially with the Westminster Confession and stalwarts of the reformed tradition, most notably B. B. Warfield and John Murray.

The distinguishing feature of Reymond's work is its embrasure and command of a presuppositionalist apologetic methodology. Permeating the work and especially evidenced in the lengthy discussions of God and Scripture, presuppositionalism is convincingly and rightly set forth (in sharp contrast, at times, with the traditional reformed tradition) as the only reasonable approach to the existence and revelation of God. Further, as in his *Justification of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), Reymond displays an uncommon ability to render presuppositionalist apologetics, a field that has historically suffered considerable obfuscation at the hands of some of its most qualified proponents, both understandable and exceptionally readable.

In keeping with his presuppositionalism, Reymond indulges in no discussion of ontological or empirical proofs for the existence and nature of God except for a masterful refutation of them (pp. 132–52). Likewise, Reymond exposes the "quest for the historical Jesus" for what it is—a rationalist subjection of the truth of Scripture to the "higher authority" of history for authentication; the subjection of infallible to fallible (p. 17; pp. 545–81). In his third chapter, "The Attributes of Holy Scripture," one of the volume's best, Reymond's uses his presuppositionalism as a solid defense for Scriptural authority and inspiration (pp. 71–73), and as the basis for his doctrines of canonization (p. 66) and cessationism (pp. 57–59). This last section, expanded in his earlier work, *What About Continuing Revelations and Miracles in the Presbyterian Church Today?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977) is quite helpful, succinctly rebuffing all arguments for continuing revelation.

Reymond also displays a keen grasp of the difference between the epistemologies of Gordon Clark and Cornelius Van Til, a topic that has

been regularly misunderstood and misrepresented in recent discussion. Reymond's is a mixture of Clarkian and Van Tilian epistemology (pp. 95–126). In contrast to Van Til he views human knowledge as “univocal (though of course not exhaustive)” (p. 102) rather than analogical to God's, thus reducing the difference between God's and man's knowledge to primarily a quantitative one (pp. 95–110).² On the other hand he takes issue with Clarkian epistemology by maintaining that knowledge is not acquired exclusively through the truth claims of Scripture (p. 147), at the same time maintaining that all genuine knowledge finds its systematization, legitimization, and justification *as truth* in the truth system of Scripture (pp. 111–126).

Reymond's unmitigated covenant theology is naturally a concern for dispensationalists. Indeed, this concern is the chief disclaimer this reviewer places on Reymond's *Theology*. The covenants are intertwined heavily throughout many of Reymond's discussions, so that the reader is obliged to use caution when extracting theological truth (which exists in great abundance) from the volume. A review is not an adequate forum for a thorough treatment of the shortcomings of covenant theology (e.g., amillennialism, paedobaptism, Presbyterianism, the replacement of the nation of Israel by the church, the continuing validity of the Law, etc.) nor for an answer to Reymond's lengthy critique of dispensationalism (pp. 507–44). However, it is adequate for the demonstration of two central flaws of the covenant system that find considerable discussion in Reymond, namely, its hermeneutic and its theological center.

After his discussion of the laws of human language and of a literal hermeneutic (pp. 17–23), an incautious dispensationalist might be tempted to applaud what appears to be, at first glance, a hermeneutic with which dispensationalists might find agreement. With scholarly grace he recognizes that a “literal” hermeneutic does not preclude figures and symbols, rejecting the straw-man argument to the contrary with which covenant theologians have perpetually plagued dispensationalism. Nonetheless, Reymond's appeal to the “great ‘analogy of faith’” (p. 23)

²Reymond essentially excludes the possibility of an analogical relationship between God's and man's knowledge, contending that, if the relationship between the two sets of knowledge is analogous *with* univocal correspondence, then it is actually univocal; if it is analogous *without* univocal correspondence then it is not an analogy at all, but equivocation. He thus equates Van Til's “analogy” with Aquinas's. Reymond's flaw is that he assumes any genuine analogy must have univocal (i.e., identical) elements. Van Til stressed analogy based not upon *identity*, but upon *similarity* (a category that Reymond seems unwilling to accept). For Van Til, man's knowledge is no more identical to God's knowledge than man's power is identical to God's power. There is a similarity, yes, but identity? Certainly not. Van Til's analogy, to this reviewer, seems to be the only way to account for a body of true knowledge that is both quantitatively and qualitatively different from God's.

leaves him an escape from normal hermeneutics—an escape which he develops on pages 50–53. While on these pages Reymond, citing Kaiser, denies *sensus plenior*, that is, that there are multiple meanings to a text to which the human author may or may not be privy, he nevertheless affirms that “it is just a fact that there are passages where there is no way the exegete can discern what the author or speaker intended without the benefit of subsequent revelational insight” (p. 51). That is, while the human and divine authors spoke univocally, with full comprehension of the meaning of their words (as demanded by normal laws of human language), readers and exegetes cannot understand what was said apart from later revelation (as much as 1500 years later). Thus the equation of Israel and the church, the continuation of the Mosaic Law, the presence of the kingdom, and the denial of a future, literal Millennium are sustained, all while allegedly following a normal, even literal, hermeneutic. One wonders whether normal laws of language can allow for revelation so adumbrative, yea, so deliberately deceptive as this within the framework of propositional divine self-disclosure and normative instruction.

Reymond’s covenant theology also demands a dual unifying center for his theological system. While there is no doubt that Reymond holds in some sense to a doxological purpose for the existence of the created universe (pp. 396–97), he nonetheless asserts for God a “more primary redemptive plan which he accomplished in Christ” (p. 397). Indeed, to consistently view “God’s kingdom and the unity of the biblical covenants as the hermeneutical key to the understanding of Holy Scripture” (p. xxxv), Reymond is obliged to assert “that the creation itself has never had any other than a redemptive *raison d’être*” (p. xx, cf. p. 398). Thus, while man’s central purpose is doxological, God’s central purpose (that which is “more primary”) is soteriological. However, Reymond’s *raison d’être* fails to explain the reason for non-redemptive revelation (e.g., angels [a topic which is strangely given no systematic treatment], the animal kingdom, hell, the eternal state, etc.). To his credit, Reymond does take on the accusation, that the original creation and pre-lapsarian Adam are non-redemptive, by viewing these phenomena as *chronologically* prior to the necessity of redemption, but *logically* subsequent (a view consistent with his supralapsarianism—pp. 397–98 cf. esp. point 1, pp. 494–95). Nonetheless, Reymond’s unifying center remains too narrow and man-centered to accommodate all God’s activity in his universe.

Despite this ultimately soteriological focus, Reymond reverts to a strongly theocentric focus in the discussion of God’s decree (Chapter 10). In it he administers a sound thrashing of Pinnock’s Arminian heresies (pp. 346–56 cf. also pp. 184–91; 378–80) in a discussion which serves as a shining fulfillment of Reymond’s promise to deliver a systematic theology that is “a corrective to these other ‘gospels,’ [namely]

Pelagian, semi-Pelagian, semi-semi-Pelagian, Arminian, apostate...which abound on every hand" (pp. xx–xxi). While many will take issue with his supralapsarianism and double predestinationism, Reymond's discussion of the decree of God and his defense of God as the decretal cause, yet not the chargeable cause of sin, nonetheless combine to constitute one of the finest chapters in the volume. His explanation of why sin necessarily entered the world (p. 377), however, should probably have been stated a bit more tentatively—the hypothesis, while logical and intriguing, is not biblically derived.

Conservatives will also be pleased with Reymond's assertion of a six-day literal creation (pp. 392–96) and his denunciation of "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" (p. 734) and all forms of inclusivist pluralism (pp. 1085–92). He ably defends the biblical veritude of hell as a place of eternal, conscious torment (pp. 1068–85). He has a firmly complementarian view on the feminist issue (pp. 900–901). His Warfieldian view of preservation and dispersion of Scripture is also refreshing (pp. 90–93). Readers should, in this author's opinion, also approve of his *ordo salutis*, in which regeneration properly precedes repentance and faith (pp. 704–11)—it is unfortunate only that he fails to give an explanation why repentance may be called "repentance *to life*" if regeneration (the impartation of spiritual life) precedes it. Reymond rightly expresses incredulity with Zane Hodges' dangerous non-repentance "easy-decisionism" (p. 722). He further includes an excellent defense of the use of the pulpit and the unadulterated Word of God (as opposed to social means) for the spread of the gospel, exposing Arminianism (not Calvinism) as the virulent foe of biblical evangelism (pp. 882–85).

A point of some concern is Reymond's view of eternal sonship (p. 324–330), by which he, overreacting to the historical misuse of *monogenhē* denies all subordinationism within the Trinity. On a practical note, the main subject index is inadequate, making the usage of the volume's full potential as a reference tool a bit limited. Perhaps future printings and editions, of which there should be many, will remedy this unfortunate deficiency.

These flaws aside, however, the *New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* emerges to vie for a place at the very top of a long list of modern systematic theologies. Theology is, or should be, the mainstay of our institutions. Thus, until dispensationalism can produce a systematic theology of comparable depth and scholarship, we will continue to rely upon works like Reymond's to buttress our own distinctive system of theology.

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