

BOOK REVIEW

Thiselton, Anthony C., *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). xiv + 453 pp. Hbk. \$40.00.

Anthony C. Thiselton, professor emeritus of Christian theology at the University of Nottingham, England, has written a single volume systematic theology that is remarkable for its comprehensiveness as well as its conciseness. His systematic theology is noticeably shorter than the single-volume works by conservative theologians such as Wayne Grudem, Millard Erickson and Michael Horton, but this does not mean that it is lacking in scope. In fact, within the space constraints of his work, Thiselton somehow manages to effectively weave together biblical exegesis, historical theology and contemporary theology while taking into account Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox perspectives. While he deals with a wide spectrum of theologians, his work is indebted in particular to Wolfhart Pannenberg, who in Thiselton's estimation has written 'the best systematic theology to date' (p. xi), and Jürgen Moltmann. In presenting the ideas of others, Thiselton's tone is consistently irenic and he endeavours to be even-handed in his presentation of conflicting viewpoints. However, this does not mean that he presents his subjects in a neutral way. For instance, he does not refrain from criticizing Catholics on the doctrine of purgatory, the teaching of certain conservative Protestants on the rapture or liberal Protestants on their view of the Parousia. Throughout all this, Thiselton interweaves devotional and practical insights connecting theology with Christian discipleship.

While being concise has its advantages, it also stands in the way of a fuller handling of some topics and more in-depth literature surveys. Thiselton notes the constraints of space several times. His treatment of some theologians is reduced to terse statements that are not always accompanied by supporting footnotes. His passing comment that Jacob Arminius 'was loyal to Reformed theology more clearly than many realize' (p. 222), for instance, is left unsubstantiated. These sections are

compressed to the point that they can do little more than provide the barest sketches of their work.

From the opening chapter onwards, it is apparent that Thiselton is not writing to introduce undergraduates to theology. He at once dives into the question of theological method, and in the first few pages, he engages with philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard and G.W.F. Hegel and theologians such as Paul Tillich and Karl Barth. Things do not get any easier after this point. The novice will have to find a more accessible foundation elsewhere before being able to benefit from this work. Even though he is writing for an informed audience, Thiselton makes a strong case that systematic theology need not be hopelessly abstracted from daily life, but can take into account that, ‘God is primarily revealed through a continuous pattern of *acts* in the world’ (p. 5) in its efforts to be coherent and rational. Pushing back against approaches to theology that do not take into account the historical context of biblical source material, he insists that systematic theology must address context in order to be truly based on Scripture. He bemoans the present divide between theology and biblical studies, arguing for the value of both enterprises not only in his chapter on methodology, but in his use of the fruit of biblical studies throughout his work. Thiselton also makes a historical and conceptual case for allowing theology to use philosophy, arguing that ‘conceptual elucidation remains of fundamental importance to the doctrines of the Christian faith’ (p. 18). The methods and values he elucidates in his opening chapter are effectively put into practice in the remainder of the book.

From method, Thiselton moves into the doctrine of God, which encompasses the personhood of God and the Trinity, how God relates to the world and the contemporary challenge of atheism. This material is covered in chapters 2 to 4. He argues that ‘God is *more* than a person, but not *less* than a person’ (p. 30), and that gender as a category cannot be rightly applied to God, who is also ‘*beyond* gender’ (p. 34). Drawing on Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus, he makes the case that trying to understand the Trinity via numerals is similarly misguided because ‘numerals may be applied only to contingent objects, not to the category of “*necessary Being*”’ (p. 33) (i.e. God). Thiselton consistently argues that we should understand God in terms of his activity rather than abstract and static concepts. He includes an up-to-date discussion of classic arguments for God’s existence and the arguments of the new atheists.

Chapters 5 to 7 cover the non-human creation, the *imago dei* and sin. His approach to angelology, the treatment of animals and ‘the ordinances of human welfare’ touch on the most important historical and contemporary positions and debates. Thiselton’s treatment of the *imago dei* begins with a summary of Vladimir Lossky’s argument that ‘because humankind damaged the image of God through alienation and self-will, the image of God can be restored only *by grace*’ (p. 136). Thiselton dismisses the idea of the image of God as ‘a natural God-given quality or right’ as ‘popular folk religion’ (p. 136). Frustratingly, and surprisingly, he does not deal with Gen. 9.6 or with Jas 3.9, which *prima facie* support the conclusions of said popular folk religion. He writes that God’s people ‘were *called* to be his image’ (p. 137, emphasis mine), but this seems to ignore the aforementioned passages that assume that *all* human beings *are* made according to his image (cf. Jas 3.9). In fact, the command not to murder and the lament concerning cursing others, respectively, hardly make sense otherwise. Notwithstanding this quibble, Thiselton deftly refutes the idea of mind-body dualism, provides a solid biblical conception of sin and masterfully traces the idea of sin from the Ante-Nicene Church Fathers to Pannenberg.

Christology and the atonement are treated in chapters 8 to 10. Substitutionary theories of the atonement have come under fire as of late. Thiselton provides a solid exegetical and historical basis for accepting the substitutionary nature of the atonement without denying the validity of complementary models of the atonement. His Christology is firmly rooted in Jesus’ historical context. He provides a critical reading of the quests for the historical Jesus and engages with contemporary New Testament scholarship at every important juncture. His survey of historical Christologies culminates once again with Moltmann and Pannenberg.

Thiselton’s treatment of the Holy Spirit is spread across chapters 11 and 12. Chapter 11 deals with biblical doctrine, focusing on the Pauline epistles in particular. In Chapter 12, he begins with the rise of Pentecostalism and then moves to historical theology, tracing pneumatology from before Nicaea to the present. Thiselton is simultaneously sympathetic and critical of Pentecostalism, highlighting both its strengths and weaknesses as a movement.

Chapter 13 takes on ecclesiology, ministry and the sacraments. The core of Thiselton’s treatment of ministry is ‘*mutual dependency and*

lack of self-sufficiency' (p. 325). Wading into the debate on infant versus believer's baptism, Thiselton wisely points out that the crux of the matter is one's theology of baptism, 'rather than depending on an inconclusive debate about the date and evidence for infant baptism' (pp. 328-29). Unfortunately, Thiselton sets up a false dichotomy between baptism as 'admission to the *corporate community of the church*' and as a '*confession of individual faith*' (p. 329), in which he implicitly favours the former. He presents no compelling argument as to why baptism as a confession of individual faith cannot be viewed as a necessary aspect of baptism *alongside* of its corporate aspect. He cites Oscar Cullmann's argument that infant baptism emphasizes divine initiative rather than a believer's conscious act, but this serves only to move initiative from the individual to his or her parents. The fact that grace precedes faith does not provide a compelling argument for infant baptism. Side stepping the long-standing debate of whether the bread is the literal body of Christ or an effective symbol, Thiselton suggests, drawing on Hans Urs von Balthasar, Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Paul Ricoeur, that the Eucharist should be thought of as 'dramatic participation' (p. 332). For Thiselton, a better way of understanding the Eucharist is a participation in the re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice for us.

In his final two chapters, Thiselton tackles eschatology, including Christ's return, the resurrection, last judgement and 'the restoration of all things'. Since it has had such a widespread effect on contemporary thought, he takes the time to debunk premillennialism, arguing that interpreting Revelation as a sequence of chronological events is misguided. On the other side of the theological spectrum, he also pushes back against biblical scholars who argue that Paul expected an imminent parousia, siding with the minority of historical and contemporary scholars. Thiselton argues that for Paul, the parousia was a possibility for his generation, but not a necessity. His work concludes with a survey of three views of the last judgement, stating, '*all three views find serious support in the history of theology, and none should be lightly or thoughtlessly dismissed*' (p. 386). The first is eternal torment, where the impenitent shall suffer eternally; the second is 'conditional immortality', his term for annihilationism; and the third is universalism, where all are ultimately restored. If he comes off as non-committal, at least the seriousness with which he treats these views is not an invitation to be light-hearted about the topic.

Those with a previous background in biblical and theological studies stand to gain the most from Thiselton's systematic theology. They will find it an invaluable up-to-date guide that takes into account a wide range of contemporary theological perspectives, especially in comparison with the much narrower scope of the other one-volume options listed above. Teachers of advanced or graduate-level courses will appreciate the restrictions Thiselton put on the length and number of chapters in order to make its content teachable over a typical school semester. Pastors who wish to explore Christian traditions outside of their own denominations will find a reliable guide in Thiselton, even when they disagree with some of his conclusions. One hopes future theologians will follow the example of his *Systematic Theology* in terms of its scope, its irenic tone and its thorough and effective integration of biblical studies, historical theology and devotional insights.

Bradley K. Broadhead
Mission Baptist Church
Hamilton, ON