

A Short Theology

A Short Systematic Theology, by Paul F. M. Zahl. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000.

In *A Short Systematic Theology*, Paul F. M. Zahl, a dean of the Cathedral Church of the Advent (Episcopal) and an editor of the *Anglican Digest*, seeks to provide the core beliefs of the Christian theology “within a brief one-volume whole” (3). Claiming to offer a concise yet “complete” theology based on the Bible (2), the book purports to explain Jesus Christ as the subject of theology, the atonement of Christ as the content of theology, and the intellectual freedom rooted in repentance as the method of theology. Overall, the book presents biblically sound points, affirming basic tenets of the Christian faith, such as the divine person, the redemptive death, and the bodily resurrection of Christ. Upon a closer inspection in light of the divine revelation, however, the book organizes these basic elements of faith into a system of theology that centers on the temporal predicament of sin-tainted humanity rather than the eternal intention of the purposeful God. Because of this misplaced focus, the book bases its theology on the historical Jesus who was graciously engaged with the world in the throes of injustice and exhorts the believers to follow His pattern by their active works of love. The book’s emphasis on emulating the external works of the historical Jesus leads to its virtual neglect of the present Christ who now abides within His believers as the Spirit for the fulfillment of God’s good pleasure to gain His enlarged expression. Thus, the book cannot but yield an incomplete theology, depriving the believers of their vital contact with Christ living in them and obscuring the scriptural revelation of the Triune God and His heart’s desire.

The Subject, Content, and Method of *A Short Systematic Theology*

A Short Systematic Theology (hereafter, *Theology*) consists of three chapters which function as three “prisms” through which “the Bible data” are “organized”: “the principle of Jesus’ continuity or continued life to the present day; the principle of atonement; and the principle of intellectual freedom in self-criticism” (2). These three chapters are composed of twenty-five theses. Chapter One, “The Subject of Theology: Jesus Christ,” opens with the first thesis that “theology is Christology” (7). The book posits that Christian theology should begin with the Jesus of history

for, unlike the abstract God of creation standing aloof from human suffering, Jesus as a concrete historical figure appeared in the world to manifest God’s grace. According to the book, the historical Jesus was the “first Christian” (22) who interrupted the never-ending cycle of the human drama of despair, turning life as servitude to sin and repetition into life as freedom and progress. He accomplished such a feat by primarily teaching “three *novums*,” that is, three “entirely new things” that radically differed from Judaism—His explicit antitheses to the teachings of Moses, His repudiation of the Sabbath, and His refutation of the laws of purity control (14). Zahl contends that His radical discontinuity with Judaism was embodied in His intimate association with sinners as their Friend, which manifested His “grace and undeserved favor” (19).

Theology proceeds to argue that “the connection between the Jesus of history (there and then) and the Christ of faith (here and now)” is the bodily resurrection of the historical Jesus (23). The book then asks, “How is the risen Christ present for us today?” (24). According to Zahl, the risen Christ is “no longer present in the tangible world” (49). He is present neither in the sacraments (the Catholic strand), nor in the written Word (the Protestant line), nor in the visual image (the Orthodox approach), nor in the gifts of the Spirit (the Pentecostal tradition). Rather, He is present only in works of human love that resemble the love that the Jesus of history manifested. The Holy Spirit is then defined as the presence of the risen Christ operating through works of compassionate love and in subjection to Providence that governs the world.

Chapter Two, “The Content of Theology: Power in the Blood,” highlights the central import of the atonement of Christ as the “governing content of Christian theology” and presents the gospel of the effective substitutionary death of Christ (52-53). The book first claims that after the fall of man, original sin became a part of the constitution of every human being, impairing intrinsically all aggregates of individuals and generating sins, that is, sinful actions. This “depth, magnitude, and widespread character of sin calls upon itself the sentence of death from God” (68). While portraying man’s dreadful destiny of death, Zahl announces the glad tidings—the death of Christ as a once-for-all “guilt-transfer” during which the sin and sins of all human beings are counted as Christ’s, and Christ’s sinlessness is counted to all human beings (57).

Postulating that right theology proceeds from action to

ontology, the book proceeds to argue that since His substitutionary death was efficacious in meeting our need, this proves that Jesus as the sacrifice must have been perfect, and since God alone is perfect, Jesus must be God. In this systematic theology, who Jesus was in His being is predicated by the fact that He died a substitutionary sacrifice which God has accepted. Hence, the “incarnation is the consequence of the atonement”; thus, it is “subordinate to the atonement” (70). The book goes on to argue that “the doctrine of the Trinity is a reflection on the doctrine of the incarnation, which in turn is a reflection on the successful substitutionary atonement of Christ on the cross” (71). Further, since God planned to be incarnated, has redeemed humanity, and is predicated as the Trinity, He “must be a Being capable of movement and transition” (74). In other words, God in His relationship to the human being must be understood as dynamic, as demonstrated by the life and death of Christ. He is capable of being moved with a variety of emotions—particularly sorrow and compassion—in response to human distress. In short, for Zahl, the atoning God is the suffering God.

Chapter Three, “The Method of Theology and the Method of Life: *Libertas christiana*,” advances a notion that Christians who are forgiven of their sins through their repentance enjoy freedom not only from judgment but also from all fixed ideas. Thus, such a freedom not only applies to theology but also extends to “all ideas and all phenomena” (82). The book argues that ever since Luther enunciated the gospel of justification by faith, the theology of forgiveness created the freedom of theology. Armed with the assurance of their salvation, now the believers could critique the text of the Bible without losing their faith in God, thus enjoying freedom from all preexisting judgments such as traditions of Christian dogma. Furthermore, this freedom enabled human beings to encounter the phenomena of the external world with the liberty of criticism but without fear. Thus, it is small wonder that the scientific revolution and the beginnings of republicanism coincided with the dissemination of Reformation insights. Zahl concludes that the free inductive method, the method of Christian theology, demythologizes all secular and religious traditions, and that demythologizing—“unconstrained right of criticism based on freedom from *idées fixes*”—is the “handmaid of Christianity’s forward movement” (89).

Theology contains some features worthy of affirmation. While other theological texts seek to accommodate the modern reader by compromising the essentials of the faith, the book admirably upholds the basic contents of “the common faith” (Titus 1:4), the objective faith that is common to all the genuine believers in Christ (Jude 3; 1 Tim. 6:12). First, the book affirms the divinity of Christ. At the outset, quoting 2 Corinthians 4:6 and John 1:18, Zahl posits that “God in any sense differentiated from Jesus Christ is unknowable” (5). The book also claims that the

effectiveness of Christ’s redemption proves His divinity. For instance, Zahl underlines the efficacy of the death of Jesus that met “our overwhelming and so highly threatening need,” and asks rhetorically, “Therefore, who could he be but God?” (69). Second, enunciating the gospel of the judicial redemption, the book faithfully proclaims repentance for forgiveness of sins in the name of Christ—as stressed by the Gospels of Mark and Luke (Luke 24:47). To explain the substitutionary character of the redemption, the book offers two helpful metaphors: the blood of the Passover lamb that saved the children of Israel from the destroyer smiting all the firstborn in Egypt, and the courtroom in which an innocent judge steps down from the judgment seat and chooses to die in the place of a guilty criminal over whom he pronounced the capital sentence.

Third, citing 1 Corinthians 15:4-8 and Romans 4:24-25, Zahl affirms the bodily resurrection of Jesus and underscores its significance as the connection between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. The resurrection of Jesus is defined as “a miracle that occurred after his death” in which “the body of the historical Jesus was transformed into a risen, enduring, and also corporeal body who was not destined, like Lazarus who was also raised from the dead, to die again” (22). Fourth, as evidenced by its earnest search for a way to “have contact with the risen Christ” (24), the book attempts to bridge the gap between theological thinkers and ordinary believers by endorsing a theology that is relevant to the daily existence of every Christian, not one that “rules out experience in favor of conceptual thinking solely” (66). For instance, Zahl says,

One of the purposes of this short systematic theology is to declare the common ground between theologians and ordinary readers in the Christian life and movement. What applies in general to the common reader applies specifically to the theological thinker. (80)

Further, the book quotes Luther’s words concerning the objective of theology: “It is not speculation or meditation that we should derive from theology, but rather experience and our very own strength to live” (66).

He goes so far as to contend that what gives systematic theology “its claim to be biblical” is precisely “the interplay of concept and pastoral experience” (66). Overall, the book conscientiously adheres to the basic items of the common faith and earnestly seeks to apply them to the experience of ordinary believers.

The Subject, Source, and Content of the Biblical Revelation

Despite its commendable features, *Theology* espouses theology that warrants critique from several angles. First, the fundamental shortcoming of the book is its pervasive focus

on the base problems of man's sin rather than the lofty purpose of the Triune God. According to the book, theology should start neither from God as the "ground of our being" nor from God as the "creator of the universe" (5), but from the "existence and ministry" of the historical Jesus (7). The book rejects theology "from the bottom up"—"theology from the vantage point of human experience," because the God who is presented in such a way is shaped according to our "perceived needs" and "unmet yearnings"; the book also critiques theology "from the top down"—theology that "starts from revealed statements about God" because God as the Creator is too detached from humanity's suffering the ubiquity of sin and the catastrophes of nature (7-9). Instead, the book offers theology "from the ground up"—ground being the birth of the historical Jesus, the sole agent through whom God's grace is manifested (9).

The Starting Point

Taken at face value, theology "from the ground up" seems to be a sensible solution to the dilemma: it ostensibly strikes a fine balance between two other extremes while elevating Christ. The book rightly admits in its introduction that "in theology, everything hinges on the starting point" (2). Yet the starting point of this theology does not accord with that of the biblical revelation. Whereas the systematic theology propounded in the book begins with the historical Jesus in view of man's vulnerability to universal sin, the divine revelation presented in the Scriptures begins with God as the Creator who framed the universe by His word and declared His eternal purpose with man. In a private council held for the creation of man, the Triune God disclosed His eternal intention to which man owes his very existence: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). Whereas He made other creatures according to their particular kind, God made man in *His* image and according to *His* likeness. This means that God created human beings according to His kind, His species, to make them His corporate reproduction. Further, God's creating man in His *image* and according to His *likeness* intimates God's intention to impart Himself into man as a vessel to become man's content and make man His enlarged expression. Before sin streamed into human history, God unveiled an eternal purpose that far transcends sin—His yearning to have man as His enlarged expression. So sharp is the contrast between the starting point of the book's systematic theology—the appearance of the historical Jesus solving the base problems of man—and that of the Bible's divine revelation—the self-disclosure of God in His lofty purpose with man—that one cannot but conclude that the book imposes on the reader its own narrative intent that markedly differs from the original intention of the Author of the Scriptures.

All Scripture originates solely from God—not man with

his idea, concept, or will (2 Pet. 1:20-21). Hence, no thought, understanding, and desire sourced in man is of any account in interpreting the Scripture. Yet unfortunately the book's theology is borne by its intent of solving the predicament of sin-plagued humanity and locates its starting point according to that intent. *Theology* fails to respect the Holy Spirit's arrangement of the sequence of the Scriptures and thus misses the original intention of God presented therein.

Theology "from the ground up" claims to start from Christ; however, the book's Christology is decidedly shaped by its *a priori* premise of the pitiful state of sinful humanity. In other words, the premise of the book's Christology rests upon yet a lower foundation—man's misery in the sinful world. Hence, theology "from the ground up" is not a balanced alternative, for at its root it is no different than theology "from the bottom up." Theology "from the ground up" apparently exalts Christ by beginning from Him, yet it actually diminishes His status in God's economy to the level of solving human problems. For us to accord Christ His rightful preeminence according to the divine revelation, we must see His centrality and universality in carrying out God's eternal purpose to gain a corporate expression.

The Scripture

Another major shortcoming of the book is that it has the potential of denying the believers' genuine experiences of Christ. Claiming to offer theology characterized by the "interplay of concept and pastoral experience" (66), the book asks a question that strikes at the heart of the believers' experience of Christ: "In what way can we have contact with the risen Christ?" (24). In answering the question the book first claims that He is not present in the tangible world: He is present neither in the sacraments (bread and wine, and the water of baptism) nor in the physical words of the Bible, nor in the visual image, nor in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, nor in His potential presence arising from the hope of His advent (49). The book is certainly right in claiming that He is present neither in bread and wine nor the water of baptism nor in the visual image nor in His potential presence arising from the future hope. Yet the book errs in implicitly denying the believers' contact with Christ through God's two greatest gifts to the believers: the Holy Word and the Holy Spirit.

The book rejects the notion that the resurrected Christ as the Spirit is embodied in the Scriptures. The underlying assumption of the book's argument is that objectification—any attempt to locate the invisible God in a tangible object—amounts to superstitious, magical thinking. Thus, the book insists, no physical object, including the Bible can be "impregnated with divinity" (29). *Theology* mentions the Protestants' answer to the criticism of objectification,

namely, “the contention that it is the Holy Spirit of God who invisibly quickens the words and makes them become to us the Word” (29). Yet this answer, according to the book, is still unsatisfactory because the presence of the invisible Holy Spirit in connection with a physical object can neither be proven nor disproven empirically. Thus, the book calls into doubt the veracity of experiences of millions of believers who “say with conviction that they experienced the risen Christ through the words of Scripture become the Word from God by virtue of the power of the Holy Spirit” (29). The upshot of the book’s desire to de-objectify the Bible is a depreciation of the Bible as a reliable means of contacting the resurrected Christ.

By contrast, the Bible reveals the indispensable need for the Scripture in our contact with the resurrected Christ. Though *Theology* rightly contends that the Bible as a mere physical object—the black ink on white pages—is not impregnated with divinity, it loses sight of the fact that as the breathing out of God, the Scripture embodies God as the Spirit for the believers’ experience of the resurrected Christ. In one sense, the book’s concern for man’s obsession with locating the invisible God in a physical object is validated by a plethora of idolatrous material objects that divert believers from God. As the book fears, if God were to be impregnated in a mere material object, Christianity “would consist entirely and only in finding and possessing the divine object,” much like an ancient search for the Holy Grail (29). Of course, holding the Bible in one’s hand as a physical article is not tantamount to possessing God Himself, who is Spirit (John 4:24). Whether the Scripture is a mere physical object with black ink on white pages or the embodiment of God as the Spirit hinges on how one comes to the Scripture.

According to the Lord’s rebuke to the Jewish religionists, if we search the Scriptures apart from coming to Him to seek after Him, the black letters on the white pages of the Scriptures in and of themselves would give us no life (John 5:39-40). In fact, according to Paul, the mere letter kills (2 Cor. 3:6). However, Paul also testifies that “all Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16); that is, the Scripture is the very breathing out of God, the embodiment of God as the Spirit. This is corroborated by the Lord’s words to the disciples: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words which I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (John 6:63). These verses indicate that the Spirit is the very essence, the substance, of the Scripture. If we come to the Scripture with a prayerful and exercised spirit and a heart turned to the Lord and seeking after Him, God as the Spirit consolidated in the written word of God will become the spoken word of God to us to be our life, life supply, and everything (2 Cor. 3:14-18). Second Timothy 3:16 reveals that through the Scripture we can inhale God as our spiritual air, and Matthew 4:4 explicitly states that “man shall not live on bread alone, but on every

word that proceeds out through the mouth of God.” Hence, the Scripture is an indispensable means of receiving our spiritual breath and bread for our strength, sustenance, and satisfaction. In failing to see the Spirit as the intrinsic substance of the Scripture and the need to exercise our human spirit in coming to the Scripture, *Theology* has the potential of annulling the believers’ enjoyment of the Scripture as the vital means of contacting Christ.

The Spirit

The book also presents an erroneous notion of the Holy Spirit. It argues that “the problem comes when the human being wishes to summon the Spirit on command. This proves impossible. It is impossible in every single case, without exception. God could not allow this, ever, for then he would be ours and not we his” (30). There is no denying that human beings should not “summon the Spirit on command” to advance their personal agenda, much less gratify fleshly yearnings. Yet the Scripture reveals that according to the principle of incarnation—God becoming man to fulfill His purpose in man, through man, and with man—God has inextricably bound Himself with man, requiring man’s willing and active cooperation to carry out His plan (Ezek. 36:37; Matt. 16:19; 18:18). As a case in point, Jehovah makes a startling declaration to the children of Israel: “Concerning the work of My hands, command Me” (Isa. 45:11). In fact, the Bible is replete with records of how God’s elect have commanded and appropriated the Spirit for the sake of God’s purpose. In Luke 11, in His teaching the disciples how to pray, the Lord emphasizes the need of asking, seeking, and knocking with “shameless persistence”: “Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened” (vv. 1-10). The Lord then assures the disciples that since even an evil earthly father gives to his children the good gifts they ask for, the heavenly Father will certainly “give the Holy Spirit to those ask Him” (vv. 11-13). Writing in a prison in Rome, Paul indicates in his letter to the Philippian believers that their petition on Paul’s behalf conveyed to him the “bountiful supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ” that enabled him to live Christ for His magnification (1:19-21). In the main, these verses show that the believers must be exercised to ask God for the Spirit, for He delights in answering requests that echo, not their personal agendas, but His own heart’s desire. *Theology* errs in precluding the existence of these subjective experiences of the believers recorded in the Scripture.

This error proves exceedingly consequential. Paul’s Epistles unveil that the normal Christian life is that of daily partaking of the Spirit—receiving the Spirit, living by the Spirit, walking by the Spirit, putting to death the practices of the body by the Spirit, and serving by the Spirit

(Gal. 3:2; 5:25; Rom. 8:13; Phil. 3:3). Apart from actively partaking of the Spirit, we can only resort to being perfected by the flesh and doing the works of law (Gal. 3:2-3). In view of a sheer lack of modern-day believers exercised to appropriate the Spirit in the details of their living, the prophet Isaiah's lament to Jehovah retains its resonance: "There is no one who calls upon Your name, / Who stirs himself up to lay hold of You." (64:7). Instead of remedying this shortage, *Theology* has the deleterious potential of hampering believers from actively partaking of the Spirit for their life and service, thereby precluding the believers' subjective, direct encounter with the Lord Himself.

Theology introduces yet another problematic notion of the Spirit—its claim that the Spirit of God, the presence of Christ, "exists concretely only in the works of love" (39). The risen Christ is, the book maintains, present in human love that mirrors the love Christ expressed when He lived on the earth. Hence, according to the book, in order to contact the risen Christ, the believers should consider being loved by a graceful God and endeavor to reproduce the works of compassionate love that the historical Jesus displayed to tax collectors and sinners. These concepts merit a twofold critique. First, in contrast to the book's contention that the "Spirit of God dwells in the works of love" (47), the Scripture emphatically reveals that the Spirit as the reality of the resurrected Christ dwells within the believers (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:17-18; Rom. 8:9-11; 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). By locating the Spirit in outward works of love rather than living within the believers, *Theology* hinders the believers from subjectively knowing the resurrected Christ living in them as the Spirit.

Second, duplicating the love of the historical Jesus requires more than our heartstrings being touched by the "Old, Old Story, of Jesus and His love" (92)—it requires that we receive the divine dispensing of the Triune God Himself as love infused into our being (2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 3:19; Rom. 15:30). Our natural human love is fickle, transient, limited, hypocritical, and fleeting; His divine love is unchanging, eternal, boundless, truthful, and imperishable (Jer. 31:3; Eph. 3:18-19; Rom. 12:9; 2 John 1; 1 Cor. 13:4-8). Hence, our human virtue of love is a vessel that needs to be filled with and enriched by His divine attribute of love as its content. Further, the love with which we are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves is not merely warm, passionate human affection (Matt. 22:39); it is the inner substance of God, even God Himself, as evidenced by John's proclamation: "God is love" (1 John 4:16). Only when God as love is imparted into us to become mingled with our love can we love fellow human beings with the divine love of Christ wrought into our human love. Since God as love is poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5), we should partake of the Spirit living in us day by day, thus organically bearing love as one facet of the multifarious fruit of the Spirit (Gal.

5:22). Living by the indwelling Spirit, like Paul, we can spontaneously love all human beings—even our enemies—with our "love in Christ Jesus" (Matt. 5:44; 1 Cor. 16:24). Certainly Paul's words that love is one of the many expressions of the fruit of the Spirit runs counter to the claim in *Theology* that the Holy Spirit can be "located" only in the works of love (92). Such a claim subordinates the indwelling Spirit as the reality of the resurrected Christ to love as an outward work believers perform. The book fails to see that love is the fruit, the product, and the Spirit is the tree, the source, not vice versa. Hence, *Theology* can only incite the believers to ruminate on the love of the historical Jesus and to emulate His love through their works in order to find the Spirit. It cannot lead them to draw the bountiful supply from the indwelling Spirit of Jesus Christ in order for His very love to flow out of them as a fruit of the Spirit (Phil. 1:19).

The Incarnation

Another shortcoming of the book is its superficial view of the incarnation of Christ. Considering the atonement as the hub from which "all the spokes of theology derive" (53), the book claims that "the incarnation is subordinate to the atonement" (70). In contrast, according to the biblical revelation, the intrinsic significance of the incarnation of Christ with His human living was not merely to accomplish the judicial redemption but, more importantly, to fulfill God's original intention in the creation of man to gain His expanded expression. Through incarnation Christ brought the infinite God into a finite man, uniting, mingling, and incorporating the Triune God with the tripartite man (John 1:1, 14; 14:10-11; Col. 2:9; Lev. 2:4-5). In Christ as the God-man, the divine attributes filled, strengthened, and enriched the human virtues. Thus, the incarnated Christ in His human living bore the image of God for the initial fulfillment of God's original intention, and now the resurrected Christ as the Spirit lives in His believers to repeat His God-expressing human living for the ultimate realization of God's intention (Col. 1:15; John 1:18; Gal. 2:20; Phil 1:20-21). In this light, the atonement of Christ cannot so dramatically overshadow God's original intention fulfilled in the incarnation and the human living of Christ. While the judicial redemption of Christ is a necessary step for God's accomplishment of His eternal purpose, the "governing content" and the "hub" of the divine revelation in the Scriptures is God's desire to dispense Himself in Christ as the Spirit into His chosen people to make them His reproduction for His enlarged expression (Eph. 3:9-11; 1:23). *Theology* fails to see the auxiliary role of the atonement in God's economy and misses the central significance of the incarnation of Christ.

The Trinity

The book also introduces errors regarding the Trinity. First,

the book diminishes the importance of the truth of the Triune God. The book posits that “the Trinity is a reflection on the incarnation as the incarnation is a reflection on the atonement” (72). Since the book argues that the need for the atonement of Christ is a reflection of the tragic human situation, the book’s notion of the Trinity is ultimately subservient to the human predicament of sin. Besides subordinating the Divine Trinity to the human predicament, the book ventures to ask, “Is [the Trinity] essential to Christian theology?” (72). In answering this question, the book quotes from Adolf von Harnack’s *What Is Christianity?* In the passage, Harnack suggests that since the propagation of the Christian faith does not hinge on “a right understanding” of the person of Christ, one need not form a correct theory of Christ and “demand assent to a series of propositions about Christ’s person” lest he or she “pervert the majesty” of the gospel (73). The book then contends that “Harnack’s worry concerning the New Testament rooting of the doctrine of the incarnation is doubly, triply valid concerning the New Testament footings for the doctrine of the Trinity” (73). While admitting that “the Trinity is an important theory insofar as it safeguards Christ’s divinity,” the book asserts that the Trinity is “too intellectual in its essence to fuel the Christian movement” and is “too distant to provide immediate hope and comfort to the hopeless and the comfortless” (73). Just as Friedrich Schleiermacher’s *Christian Faith* begins with the common human experience of “Gefühl,” a feeling of utter dependence, and regards the Trinity as an appendix, *Theology*, whose theology “from the ground up” is actually that “from the bottom up,” asserts that “the Trinity is the last development in the logic of systematic theology” (73).

In the logic of systematic theology, the Trinity is the “last development,” but the Triune God is the first scene in the revelation of the holy Scriptures. The Bible opens with the Triune God—the Father, Son, and Spirit—coordinating to create the universe (Gen. 1:1-3). As the active agent, God the Father called into being the creation (Psa. 33:9; Rom. 4:17); He did so through His speaking which implies the Son as the Word (Heb. 11:3; John 1:1, 3); and the “Spirit of God was brooding upon the surface of the waters” to generate life (6:63; 1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:6). Moreover, the Trinity is not a mere human construct to “safeguard” the divinity of Christ; the Divine Trinity is the very structure of the entire Bible. In every step of His economy, from the creation of the universe to the consummation of the New Jerusalem, the Triune God applies His triune being to His tripartite man to dispense Himself into man for His enlarged expression (Gen. 1:1-3, 26; John 14—16; Eph. 3:14-17; 4:4-6; Rev. 21:2; 22:1). Without the basic understanding of the Divine Trinity, believers lack an adequate foundation upon which to build a proper knowledge of the Bible and their service for our Lord. Hence, far from questioning its essential place in Christian theology, we must aspire to gain a proper knowledge of the Divine Trinity

according to the pure revelation of the Scripture. When we possess such a foundational understanding of the Triune God, instead of subordinating the Divine Trinity to the human problem, we will see how the Triune God carries out His economy according to His triune being, not according to man’s needs.

Certainly the Triune God is a profound mystery that eludes the full grasp of man’s mind. Yet He desires all men to be saved and to come to the full knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4). For this express purpose, He has imparted into us His eternal life that we may “know” Him (John 17:3); He has also given us the Spirit of reality who will teach us “all things” and guide us “into all the reality” of the Triune God (14:26; 16:13). Hence, the Divine Trinity is not “too intellectual” to “fuel the Christian movement” nor “too speculative to motivate mission” (73). Rather, no amount of man’s zeal but only the proper revelation of the Triune God can motivate the believers to carry out the unique mission entrusted to them—the building up of the Body of Christ, of which the Father as the source is the Originator, the Son as the Lord is the Creator, and the Spirit as the essence is the Executor (Eph. 4:1-12). Apart from having the Divine Trinity as its source, substance, means, and goal, all Christian work is but wood, grass, and stubble that will be burned by the judging fire, for it does not match His triune being and only mars His divine building (Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 3:10-17). Furthermore, the Divine Trinity is not “too distant to provide immediate hope and comfort to the hopeless and the comfortless” (73). While the book speaks of the Trinity being “too distant,” Paul assures the believers of their having access unto the Father through Christ the Son in one Spirit (Eph. 2:18). Caring for His disciples who might feel disheartened as orphans after His death, Jesus promises them that He as the Son would ask the Father to give them another Comforter, the Spirit of reality, who will abide within them forever as the realization of the resurrected Christ (John 14:1, 15-20, 26-27). When consoling and encouraging the repentant believers in Corinth, Paul blessed them with the Divine Trinity—the Father as the love, the Son as the grace, and the Holy Spirit as the fellowship (2 Cor. 13:14). All in all, apart from knowing the Triune God in truth and experience, there is no Christian faith, no Christian life, and no Christian work. By minimizing the import of the truth of the Trinity, *Theology* does a great disservice to the reader aspiring to grow “in the grace and knowledge of our Lord” (2 Pet. 3:18).

Second, the book fails to show that the Triune God has passed through processes in Christ to impart Himself as life into His believers. Though the book seeks to emphasize the “dynamic” character of “God in his relationship to the human being,” it argues that “we cannot discover in the Bible the idea that God is in development or process, that is, not yet fully realized but *becoming*” (74). On the

one hand, in His intrinsic being—His essence, nature, and attributes—the Triune God is eternally immutable. On the other hand, in His economy to interact with man, the Triune God in Christ has undergone the processes of incarnation, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection and became consummated as the life-giving Spirit. Hence, the New Testament testifies that just as in incarnation Christ as “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14), in resurrection Christ as “the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45). Now the Triune God processed in Christ and consummated as the life-giving Spirit can dispense Himself as life into man. Blind to such a view of the Triune God, *Theology* can only assert that “God is in relationship to humanity principally in the sending of Christ to die for the many” (74).

Christian Freedom

Finally, *Theology* presents an unscriptural notion of Christian freedom. As aforementioned, according to the book, as human beings receive forgiveness of sins through their repentance, they are altogether freed from the fear of judgment and from all *idées fixes*. That the forgiven believers no longer need to sustain *idées fixes*, the book claims, yields two consequences: it not only creates the liberty to encounter the Bible without fear, the freedom of theology; it also leads to “freedom in every field of human experience” Though it connects such a freedom to “the works of love” (93-94), the book nevertheless asserts that a Christian armed with such a freedom “has nothing to fear” (87). Yet according to the biblical testimony, although they have been freed from the fear of eternal perdition, the believers in Christ must lead an exceedingly restricted life in every detail of their living and work under the strict rule of the indwelling Spirit. The Lord Jesus, the prototype of all His believers, furnishes an excellent example. As a man on whom the Spirit of the fear of Jehovah rested, He delighted in the fear of Jehovah (Isa. 11:2-3). Christ throughout His earthly sojourn lived restfully under the yoke of the Father’s will, fully submitting Himself to the direction, restriction, and control of His indwelling Father (Psa. 16:6; Matt. 11:28-30; John 14:10). Hence, He did nothing from Himself except what He saw the Father doing, seeking not His own will but that of the Father, doing not His own work but that of the Father, speaking not His own word but that of the Father’s abiding in Him (5:19, 30; 4:34; 14:10, 24). *Theology* quotes the Lord’s words regarding freedom: “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free” (John 8:32); yet it neglects His imperative to the disciples to enter in through the narrow gate and walk on the constricted way, for these lead to life, while the wide gate and the broad way lead to destruction (Matt. 7:13-14). As a man with no freedom of His own, Christ was constantly under the authority of the Father’s living within Him (8:9; John 8:29).

In this light, Paul, a God-appointed pattern to the believers (1 Tim. 1:16), was a duplicate of Christ. As an apostle “knowing” the “fear of the Lord,” Paul charged the believers in Philippi to work out their own salvation “with fear and trembling” (2 Cor. 5:11; Phil. 2:12). While triumphantly declaring that “Christ has set us free,” Paul cautions the believers not to “turn this freedom into an opportunity for the flesh” (Gal. 5:1, 13). To Paul, the very Spirit of life that liberated him from the dreadful sways of sin and death also forbade him to spread the gospel in Asia and disallowed him to go into Bithynia (Rom. 8:2; Acts 16:6-7). Though, as underlined by *Theology*, Paul was emancipated from the grips of the Judaistic traditions, he nonetheless was not ashamed of his status as a “prisoner in the Lord,” enjoying the Lord as his prison who circumscribed his living and work (Gal. 1:13-16; Eph. 3:1; 4:1; 6:20). Just as the Lord Jesus did not impart His own teaching but spoke the things which the Father had taught Him (John 7:16; 8:26), Paul in fear and trembling taught the mystery of God, “not in words taught by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:1-4, 12-13). Hence, he strictly forbade any teaching other than God’s New Testament economy and warned the believers to be wary of every wind of teaching in the sleight of men “with a view to a system of error” (1 Tim. 1:3-4; Eph. 4:14). Contradicting the book’s claim that believers are free from all judgment, Paul admonishes the believers to gain the honor of being well pleasing to the Lord on account of the judgment seat of Christ at which all the believers will “receive the things done through the body” according to what they “practiced, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:9-11). Despite his assurance that he has been eternally saved by grace, Paul nonetheless confesses his own fear of being disapproved by the Lord and thus receiving a dispensational punishment (Eph. 2:5, 8; 1 Cor. 9:27). Blind to the ruling of the divine life in the believers, *Theology* presents an unhealthy notion of the unbounded Christian freedom that can at once produce winds of different teaching and usher the believers through the wide gate and into the broad way.

Affirming basic items of the common faith, *A Short Systematic Theology* seeks to “contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) and enhances the believers’ appreciation of the judicial redemption of Christ. Yet the book falls far short of its stated goal to present a “complete” theology (2). By constructing a system of theology that appeals to the human logic, human viewpoint, and human predicament, the book altogether misses the source, subject, and content of the divine revelation in the Scripture—the eternal economy of God to gain His organic, expanded expression.

by David Yoon