

Consensus

Volume 23

Issue 1 *Essays in the History of Interpretation*

Article 9

5-1-1997

Christian doctrine

Richard A. Muller

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Muller, Richard A. (1997) "Christian doctrine," *Consensus*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol23/iss1/9>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

BOOK REVIEWS

Christian Doctrine

Shirley C. Guthrie

Revised Edition

Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994

xiv + 434 pp \$17.99 US

The first edition of this one-volume doctrinal synopsis of "Reformed" theology was an ill-researched essay intended for adult Sunday-school classes. Revision of the work has not altered its original character. Perhaps its most pronounced characteristic is its personal, chatty style. It addresses individual people with personalized comments about the nature of theology and the identity of theologians: thus, "You are not only a Christian; you are either a *male* or a *female* whose life, in fact if not in theory, is as much determined by your sexual as by your religious needs and desires, thoughts, and instincts" (p. 3). The question, however, is whether one's *theology* ought to be determined by one's sexuality—and whether, indeed, personal experience of any sort ought to be a primary criterion for theological formulation. And this is not a question with which Guthrie chooses to wrestle.

Guthrie's "doctrine of sin" appears in a chapter entitled "Why Don't You Just Be Yourself". The chapter begins with anecdotes, describing original sin in terms of a mother at the breakfast table who doesn't want to be grumpy but is grumpy nonetheless (cf. p. 221ff.), and can never quite come to overt terms with the fact that "being one's self" may just be the entire problem. In the same chapter one finds a discussion of "Adam as our Representative" that reduces the problem of federal headship to the necessity of looking at Adam to find out who we are—this approach, according to Guthrie, avoids a fatalistic determinism: "Adam has not poisoned the human race or passed down an inescapable disease or infection. No one *has* to be Adam. '*You ain't got to!*'" (p. 223). Note well that Calvin states, "Adam, by sinning, not only took upon himself misfortune and ruin but also plunged our nature into like destruction" or, if that is not clear enough, "Adam so corrupted himself that infection spread from him to all his descendants" (*Institutes*, II.i.6). Calvin did not understand his view

as a fatalistic determinism—but at the same time he did assume that the infection was inescapable. Sorry, Professor Guthrie, “You *do* got to.”

Yet another example of the utter absence from this volume of competent research and, indeed, of appreciation of the richness of the Christian tradition, is its brief denunciation of Anselm and the “satisfaction theory” of atonement as “unbiblical”. This view must be unbiblical, Guthrie avers, because Scripture never uses the word “satisfaction” (p. 258). (Of course, this very same problem—the failure of Scripture to use a term—does not prevent Guthrie from advocating his own version of the doctrine of the Trinity.) After offering a caricature of Anselm’s teaching—as if it rested on the assumption that “Jesus came” to “change God’s mind”—a view of God’s nature entirely foreign to Anselm—Guthrie appeals to Calvin as the author of an alternative position. Once again, Calvin: “Christ allowed himself to be condemned...to make *satisfaction* for our redemption” and again, “Christ was offered to the Father in death as an expiatory sacrifice that when he discharged all *satisfaction* through his sacrifice, we might cease to be afraid of God’s wrath” (*Institutes*, II.xvi.5, 6). If Anselm’s theory is unbiblical because of its use of the term “satisfaction”, so too is Calvin’s. Guthrie ought not to appeal to Calvin for support. And if the concept identified by both Anselm and Calvin by the term “satisfaction” is a biblical concept (an assumption held nearly universally by the Reformers, the Reformed confessions, and the orthodox Protestant tradition), then Guthrie is neither biblical nor Reformed.

The preceding paragraphs do not, perhaps, constitute a politically correct review. But it is also the case that, with the publication of every review of a textbook, the intellectual, religious, and spiritual formation of young minds is at stake. A polite or consciously innocuous review of a poorly done book may contribute to the perpetuation of error, incompetence, or inanity. This reviewer will not accept that burden.

Richard A. Muller
Calvin Theological Seminary
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, Evangelical. Volume II

James Leo Garrett
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995
x + 872 pp. \$45.00

In this second and final volume of his *Systematic Theology*, Professor James Leo Garrett of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary completes his highly instructive journey through all of the traditional topics of