

BOOK REVIEW: SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

ROBERT LETHAM (CROSSWAY) REVIEWED BY MARK POWELL

Even if you've been haven't had the privilege of studying at Bible College, systematic theologies are an invaluable gift and guide. This is because their purpose is to synthesize the incredible amount of data contained within the pages of Scripture and attempt to show how they fit together as a whole. In this regard, Letham's book is a valuable edition.

But maybe it should also come with a word of warning, in that it is by no means an easy read. This is because Letham spends probably more time interacting and engaging with the opinions of others than he does with the text of Scripture itself. Some people will really appreciate this, whereas others will find it frustrating because the discussion can become quite detailed and technical.

Letham comes from a classically 'reformed' perspective. He himself is a Presbyterian minister and as such holds to the confessional standard of the Westminster Confession of Faith. What's more, his book is the obvious fruit of a lifetime of teaching and reading on the subject, which means that it contains a wealth of information and reflection. It is also clearly structured and well-written.

There were a few things, though, that I didn't personally like. One of the first parts I read was his appendix on how to interpret Genesis 1. And while acknowledging that it is historical narrative—and not Hebrew poetry—he is reluctant to treat the

text literally as it has been historically understood. He's very even-handed and balanced, but I personally found his conclusions too nuanced and ultimately unconvincing.

Likewise, when Letham addresses the highly emotive and controversial issue of the role of women in the church he seems to want to have his cake and eat it too. What I mean by that is, it's difficult to know what he really thinks this should look like in practice as he seems to say things which are contradictory. For instance, while acknowledging that Scripture debars women from the office of being a teaching elder (1 Tim. 2: 11-15), Letham argues, "That does not mean that women are debarred from teaching". In fact, he goes on to say, "Probably most of the teaching in the church is conducted by women."

But with that said, Letham offers a robust defence of all of the doctrinal positions contained within historic Presbyterian theology. Indeed, he demonstrates that he is something of an expert in this regard, especially when dealing with the opinion of other scholars. This is both the greatest strength and weakness of the book. It is excellent on accessing what reformed theologians have thought down throughout the years, but Letham doesn't really interact much with those outside of his own theological position—for instance, Baptist's such as Schriener, Carson and Grudem.

However, this will be a valuable addition to anyone's theological library, and will prove to be

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especially helpful if you are teaching systematic theology yourself.

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JOEL R. BEEKE

President and Professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

"Letham sets before us the ripe fruit of a long career of devoted scholarship. He does so with clarity, confidence, and thoughtful judgment. A magnum opus indeed."

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

Chancellor's Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

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Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies, Grove City College

"Letham's Systematic Theology is located within the great tradition of Christian theology, drawing upon Patristic, medieval, Reformational, and contemporary sources. Theologians, students of theology, and church members alike will find Letham's work a wonderful gift to the church."

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President and Professor of Doctrinal Studies, Mid-America Reformed Seminary

"It is good to have one so thoroughly conversant with the history of the church, as well as the Bible, to write a systematic theology that resonates for our times as does this one. I heartily commend this new work to all."

ALAN D. STRANGE

Professor of Church History, Mid-America Reformed Seminary; author, *The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church* in the Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge

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