

The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries: Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple edited by David VanDrunen. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004. Pp. 311. \$18.99 paper.

The volume is a festschrift to systematic theologian, Robert B. Strimple, who served on two campuses of Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia and Escondido). The work is divided into four parts; each part contains essays by those who have taught or are teaching at the Westminster seminaries: “Historical Studies” (D. G. Hart, Edmund Clowney); “Systematic Theology among Other Disciplines” (Michael Horton, John Frame, Dennis Johnson); “Particular Issues in Westminster Systematics” (Robert Godfrey, R. Scott Clark, Richard Gaffin, Jr., David VanDrunen); and “Westminster Systematic Theology and the Life of the Church” (John Muether, Derke Bergsma, Jay Adams, Clair Davis). In tribute, many of the essays casually note Strimple’s care of the Scriptures as he sustained the theological tradition of John Murray. However,

as one carefully reads the *festschrift*, it seems more intent on displaying the present tension within the Westminster theology. Instead of a unified exegetical theology, the Westminster theology seems mired in debate, division, opposition, and rivalry. Perhaps, the editor is to be complimented for not thrusting the current conflicts under the table. Even so, the essays raises serious questions about the harmonious state of systematics at the seminaries. As the two seminaries evolve into a third generation of the study of systematic theology; we seem far removed from Cornelius Van Til's testimony to G. C. Berkouwer of his harmonious alliance with his colleague in systematic theology, John Murray.

D. G. Hart's initial essay sets the contentious tone that characterizes much of the volume. Defending Hodge's inductive theological method, Hart attacks the Westminster theology found in Murray, Van Til, and Gaffin. In his estimation, their position that systematic theology is dependent upon Biblical theology is a deviation from Charles Hodge and J. Gresham Machen (19-24). Hart asserts that the scientific method of Old Princeton "yielded an approach to theology that was orderly, precise, and routine" (25). In his view, Westminster systematics has "lost its regal standing" in light of the "creative" nature of biblical theology, and thus, "systematics no longer provide the coherence they once did at Old Princeton" (25). As we learn in other essays, Hart has attacked the core that came to distinguish the Westminster theology. Many essays affirm that the distinctive characteristic of the Westminster theology is an exegetically informed systematic theology; some specifically mention that biblical theology is the discipline that informs its systematics (Clowney, Horton, Gaffin, Van Drunen, Davis).

Perhaps, if Hart has read the subsequent essays, he may believe that his thesis is verified, especially by the third generation from the Escondido campus. With little interaction with the first and second generation, Horton attempts to discover and set forth a fresh and more coherent look at the "reintegration of systematic theology and biblical theology" in an eclectic discussion with mainline critical theology (68). Moreover, advancing Otto Weber's position on coherence, Van Drunen's concern is more pointed. He believes that Murray and Gaffin fail to provide "a unifying principle that in some way encompasses" the "unity, coherence, and harmony" of a holistic systematic theology" (200). For VanDrunen, that unifying principle is the "covenant," specifically grounded in the "covenant of redemption" (209, 217). In particular, VanDrunen is committed to Meredith Kline's view of the covenant, and hence, we are forced to ask whether the western campus is determined to revive the controversial elements of the Kline-Murray debate on the covenant in order to project their own "new" version of the Westminster theology. In light of their quest for a fresh look at the Westminster theology, Horton and VanDrunen, and for that matter, D. G. Hart's affinity with Hodge's theological method, demonstrate an ignorance with Gaffin's classroom work on prolegomena, method, coherence, covenant, and a unifying principle for a holistic systematic theology. For this

reason, the volume presents a serious wedge within the Westminster theology that now separates the Philadelphia and the Escondido campuses.

Perhaps, this wedge between the two campuses is most noticeable in the essay by Robert Godfrey. Godfrey voices his concern about the doctrine of justification and its relationship to the Reformed confessions with respect to the Shepherd controversy. For Godfrey, the controversy revealed that “for some who belong to the Westminster school of theology, there is a weakness in the understanding both the role and the content of the confessions in the life of the Reformed churches” (140). In light of those whom Godfrey mentions, it seems that the Philadelphia campus is under attack. Highlighting John Frame’s observation that Murray’s classes neglected confessional instruction, Godfrey notes that the present atmosphere of a “sympathetic-critical” approach to the confessions (Gaffin and Trumper) provided an environment at Philadelphia in which Shepherd could produce a position on justification that was “not always fully familiar with the Reformed confessions” (141, 138; cf. Muether’s essay that challenges Frame’s thesis). Hence, Godfrey has serious concerns with the eastern campus in two areas: the lingering controversy of justification and fidelity to the Reformed confessions. Godfrey’s concern in the second area may reside close to home. Horton, who teaches on the western campus, claims that there are “sentiments” at Westminster to G. Ernest Wright’s position that systematic theology and the Reformed confessions “lack the colour, the flexibility, and movement of the Bible;” such theologies and documents are cold and abstract as they fall prey to a scholasticism that appears unhistorical (51). If such sentiments are pronounced at Westminster, then it does not seem that the western campus is immune to the danger of confessional fidelity. For example, the volume contains little exegetical theology. What will the “new proposals in dogmatic and biblical theology” look like on the western campus in relation to the Reformed confessions (65)?

Moreover, if new proposals are forthcoming in the relationship between systematic and biblical theology, there seem to be two further obstacles that must be overcome in the Westminster theology: (1) the embedded quarrel between biblical theology and practical theology, and (2) the endless quest to bring together the theoretical and the practical. On the first point, Adams stresses serious concern with the ascension of biblical theology over systematic theology that occurred in the late 1960s. According to Adams, the ascendancy of biblical theology created an improper balance between the two theological fields, and it had the effect of eroding exegesis, homiletics, and systematic theology (265, 268). Moreover, in his judgment, this deterioration had a profound effect on preaching as well. Adams claims that those who came under the conviction of biblical theology preached the indicative (union with Christ) at the exclusion of the imperative (application; 265). In fact, Adams holds that “biblical-theological” preaching resists “using application in sermons” (264).

Adams’ strident tone demonstrates that the seminaries are not close to resolving the problem over the relationship between biblical theology, system-

atic theology, and preaching that has characterized their campuses over the last thirty years. This failure is not a surprise; it is merely a subtopic of the perpetual quest to find the ingredient that will bridge systematic (theoretical) and practical theologies. Frame's essay alludes that the bridge resides within the structure of his "multi-perspectival" understanding of revelation (92). On the other hand, as practical theologians, Johnson believes that the bridge is best connected by practical theology establishing itself in a biblically based systematic theology (103), whereas Bergsma visualizes that the bridge is experientially connected by demanding that the seminary faculty be involved in the pastoral work of the churches (250). Until the Aristotelian presuppositions between the theoretical and the practical are exposed and critiqued on the basis of the historical revelation of the triune God of the Bible, theologians will burn the midnight oil in the endless quest to bridge the two realms. Meanwhile, they remain divisive entities within the theological disciplines of the seminaries.

In my judgment, it is disappointing that a volume in honor of Strimple was used to vent the problems within the Westminster theology. For this reason, the air of division overshadows any scholarly contribution in the volume, e.g., Clark's contribution. Oddly, in this state, the work is informative, and yet, distressing. We cannot help but notice that such divisions have found their way into Christ's church. Indeed, healthy differences and debate will always exist in the church, but one wonders if the volume has crossed the line of intramural and brotherly debate. Davis's final essay seems strategically placed to make a gallant effort to bridge many of the divisions that characterize the present state of affairs. Even so, we have come to the sober understanding that we are far removed from the harmonious project of the first generation, who, as a unified faculty committed to a unified mission produced the volume, *The Infallible Word*. We long for such leadership and unity on the campuses of Westminster but even more importantly, in the church!

—William D. Dennison