

Review

ESV Systematic Theology Study Bible. Edited by Christopher Morgan, Robert Peterson, and Stephen Wellum. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishing, 2017. 1,904 pp. Hardcover \$39.99. ISBN 9781433553370.

The Crossway *ESV Systematic Theology Study Bible* attempts to reconcile the tension between *sola scriptura* and systematic theology by placing doctrinal statements in direct contact with the biblical text. This is no easy task—the Bible is notoriously unsystematic and rarely doctrinal. The editors of this volume have essentially taken the Reformed system and integrated it into the canon in a series of 424 digressive sidebars, 66 textual introductions, and 24 doctrinal essays covering the range of traditional theological categories.

Doctrine is defined in the first essay (by David Wells) as “the way the central themes of God’s revelation in Scripture are summarized and taught.” Throughout the essays, doctrine and revelation are closely tied together. Yet revelation consists of showing something: in Scripture, primarily God’s own self, and secondarily, other truths. Doctrine, on the other hand, consists of teaching (the word derives from the Latin *docere*, “to teach”). Summarizing and thinking are human actions. God is revealed in the narrative of Scripture (and elsewhere); humans think and reflect and develop philosophical systems to make sense of that revelation. Some of the essays acknowledge this, but the human dimension of this process is downplayed. Within this Study Bible itself, for instance, the contributors literally disappear after the first few pages. The sidebars and essays are unattributed within the text, giving them the appearance of consistency and even of canonical authority. Only by examining the list of contributors on page *ix* would readers know, for instance, that all the contributors are conservative Reformed evangelical men from English and American colleges, seminaries, and churches.

There is nothing inherently wrong with such a narrow focus, but it can obscure certain shared assumptions. By way of example, consider this logical leap from John Frame’s essay “Apologetics”: “Since the Bible is God’s Word, it always sets forth its message clearly and rationally” (1,648). This statement is packed with assumptions. Why would God’s Word be clear and rational? Isn’t God beyond comprehension? Why is “Word” capitalized? What does “rational” mean? Further confusing the reader, Frame offers an illustration from Scripture, the story of the Red Sea crossing in Exodus 14. To accept this miracle seems to be a violation of natural law and of “rational possibility,” but a believing reader simply accepts this “irrationality” as “rational.” Of course, Frame rightly wants to call attention to the way in which God exceeds our preconceived notions of rationality; but then, it doesn’t make much sense to speak of God’s word as “rational.” Maybe, intelligible?

Frame's example also points to a method of exegesis which pits revelation against reason: *either* there is a naturalistic explanation for the events of Exodus 14 *or* God supernaturally intervened in the world and made it happen. Yet theology as I have experienced it exists precisely to think beyond these simplistic dualisms rooted in the Enlightenment critique of religion. To be fair, some of the theological essays present a more sophisticated approach to reading Scripture—Christopher Morgan's essay "How do to Theology" is one example. Yet the tenor of the collection suggests that any open-minded reader should arrive at Reformed teachings such as unconditional election and substitutionary atonement (1,649). "Rational" and "common sense" turn out to be the very particular doctrinal positions of a handful of Southern Baptist theologians.

The ESV Bible itself is well made, including many of the same features and format that made the ESV Study Bible so popular. Each of the contributors has a high regard for Scripture. Yet the inclusion of a "systematic theology"—whether Catholic or Reformed or Orthodox or other—between the covers of the Bible gives any particular human interpretive system more weight and authority than it deserves. Theological reflection and systemization is an essential task, but it is an essentially human task. Doctrine is not revelation.

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