

# Book Reviews

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Robert Sherman. *Covenant, Community, and the Spirit: A Trinitarian Theology of the Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015.

*Covenant, Community, and the Spirit* is the second installment of a projected trilogy by Robert Sherman focusing on the Triune God's work in creation, redemption, and the church. It follows on his *King, Priest, and Prophet: A Trinitarian Theology of Atonement* (2004). Sherman was professor of Christian Theology at Bangor Theological Seminary, a theological college of the United Church of Christ, until the closing of that institution in 2014.

As in *King, Priest, and Prophet*, Sherman's point of departure is the patristic adage *opera ad extra trinitatis indivisa sunt* ("the external works of the Trinity are undivided") brought to bear on the Spirit's primary area of activity, the church. After two introductory chapters on the irreducibly communal nature of humanity and the Holy Spirit's particular role in relation to the Father and the Son, Sherman devotes one chapter each to the biblical motifs of body of Christ, people of God, and temple of the Holy Spirit. A final chapter draws these themes together, showing how the dynamic character of each contributes in grounding the church in God's action in the past, while at the same time orienting her to the eschatological future of God's eternal kingdom.

The chapters developing the different biblical expressions each focus on the work of a particular person of the Trinity: the body of Christ focuses on the Son's activity, the people of God on the Father's, and the temple of the Holy Spirit on the Spirit's. This is perhaps Sherman's most original contribution: because the outward works of the Trinity are undivided and yet distinct, one can profitably explore how the Spirit works out, in the church, those aspects of salvation that are specific to the Father, those specific to the

Son, and those that are properly the Spirit's. The following can serve as a summary of the general approach:

In keeping with *the Father's* gracious purposes and covenantal plan, the *Holy Spirit* knits together a particular community to be the continuous earthly "body" of its crucified and risen head, *Jesus Christ*, who is seated at the right hand of the Father as the world's Lord and Savior. (73–74, italics added)

Sherman's emphasis on the communal nature of humanity, and so also of redeemed humanity, is no less important. This too is a consequence of his Trinitarian focus. Because humans are created in the image of the Triune God, community is no less integral to humanity than is individuality. For the present reviewer, the reflections on this subject are in themselves worth the price of the book.

How successful is Sherman in combining the double motifs of the Triune God's undivided work and the specific biblical emphases of each person's contribution to the life of the church? Perhaps the question can best be answered by a description of the final product: Sherman has given us not so much a book on the doctrine of the Trinity or the church per se as an incursion into diverse aspects of the Spirit's activity in the church. By the author's own admission, the chapters on the specific works of each person of the Godhead, more than anything, offer a springboard for developing different facets of ecclesiology: worship, Christian identity, church discipline, and so on. This can sometimes give the impression of a "catch-all" of discrete themes held together by an overarching reference to one of the persons of the Trinity. This is especially apparent in the chapter on the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit, where Sherman himself seems conscious of the somewhat arbitrary character of certain rapprochements (see his comments, 173–75). On the whole, though, this approach does not detract from *Covenant, Community, and Spirit's* quality; the variety of the themes, and the way they show how the Spirit applies the work of the Godhead in the church, is usually quite helpful in drawing out the book's emphases.

Sherman is generally conservative and writes from an avowedly Reformed perspective. He regularly and approvingly quotes Calvin and the sixteenth and seventeenth century confessional documents. His aim, however, is not to merely restate or defend traditional formulations but to move theological reflection forward, bringing it into contact with recent developments and specific situations in which the (especially American) church finds herself in the twenty-first century. After Calvin, the most frequently cited theologian is Karl Barth, and several points—Sherman's affirmation of the election of all humanity in Christ, for instance—clearly betray this influence. Sherman

focuses on positive theological construction and welcomes other traditions into the discussion wherever possible. This can be seen, for instance, in his developments on baptism and the Lord's Supper, borrowing categories from the ecumenical document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (95–100), although his own presentation remains basically indebted to Calvin. Sherman also offers a highly personal—one might say eccentric—understanding of the Reformed teaching of “the covenant of grace” and “the covenant of works” (55–62). The overall result is a theology that can be described as warmly and moderately Reformed, with an eye to ecumenicity.

Although numerous points could be mentioned, this review will limit its comments to one specific element. As mentioned earlier, the book's emphasis on the communal nature of redemption and sanctification is especially helpful. Against a highly exacerbated individualism that pervades Western culture and has made deep inroads in the church—including some forms of Reformed ecclesiology—Sherman underscores the profoundly social nature of humanity:

Each of us is placed within a particular historical and cultural ecology, upon which we depend for our individual lives and to which we contribute for good or for ill. Our physical existence derives from a long chain of progenitors. Our psychological, linguistic, and spiritual existence is nurtured by family, friends, teachers, indeed a whole cultural matrix rooted in the past and extending into the future. Our fears and concerns, our hopes and aspirations, are always fostered by and exercised within a particular communal context ... that we simultaneously receive and further. (3)

This corporate nature is not merely a fact. It is how we were made to be, as creatures formed in the image of the triune God.

Communal considerations also help explain the social embeddedness of sin and redemption. Original sin, states Sherman, is not so much a biological datum as the fact that, from the moment we come into the world, we are enmeshed in a situation dominated by actions and attitudes—in brief, human beings—oriented toward self and against God:

This is why it does not suffice to locate immorality and evil solely in individuals. The repercussions of individual acts embed themselves in a broader context, so that the acts and their context then combine and interact in unexpected ways and, as a result, become the context in which further individual acts are done.

Because of this, says Sherman, “evil is a matter no longer merely of particular misdeeds but also of broader structures and patterns of being, of received cultures and thought worlds” (14). As a description of original sin, this remains, from a Reformed perspective, incomplete—as is evidenced by

Sherman's somewhat disappointing explanation of Psalm 51:2–5 (16). That being said, the specifically corporate and social aspects of evil, highlighting that we are caught up from birth in an all-pervasive web of human sin, helpfully supplement traditional presentations, sometimes unduly limited to individually inherited guilt.

The upshot of all this is that, in redemption also, God's plan is not merely to save individuals but to redeem a people. This is, of course, classic Reformed theology. The practical outworking, however, is a refreshing emphasis on the role of the community for all of Christian life:

The scriptural witness makes it abundantly clear that salvation is a social, covenantal reality that unfolds in time toward a divine end, and that the God effecting this salvation is trinitarian. The Triune God does not save by plucking individuals up to heaven or by us establishing a particular social agenda or political regime following Jesus's example. Rather, salvation is the fruit of God's embedding persons in a community called and sanctified (which is to say, set apart) by the Holy Spirit to be a witness to God's own fulfillment of creation's ultimate goal in the work of Jesus Christ. (41)

On the whole, *Covenant, Community, and the Spirit* is a helpful reflection on how the church, as the community of those living together in the sphere of God's grace and lordship, can thrive in an increasingly individualistic, secularized, and postmodern culture. The book bristles with theological and practical thoughts on the church's life, call, and witness, and it will generously repay repeated meditation. Admittedly, some sections may be a challenging read for churchgoers with no formal theological education, while it might strike others as not going deep enough into certain issues. But this should not detract Christians, especially pastors and teachers, from grappling with the issues Sherman develops and asking how the church can better understand, and live out, her communal nature—and her communal testimony—in today's world.

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Herman Selderhuis. *Martin Luther: A Spiritual Biography*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017.

Among the many books published on Martin Luther in 2017 to commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of the Ninety-Five Theses, Herman Selderhuis's book *Martin Luther: A Spiritual Biography* offers a fascinating