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Robert Letham. *Systematic Theology*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019.

It is no slight task to write a comprehensive systematic theology in a single volume. Not only does the author need to be able to cover all the dogmatic *loci*, but he also needs to do so concisely. Robert Letham, a presbyterian minister and professor of systematic theology at Union School of Theology in the United Kingdom, manages to do both. His pastoral experience informs his theology. He is committed to the Reformed, confessional theology as expressed in the Westminster Confession but does not limit himself to discussions within that tradition. His scope includes Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann, as well as patristic, medieval, and Reformed theologians.

I will highlight three general characteristics of Letham's approach and then delve into some details.

First, Letham begins his theology with a discussion of the Triune God rather than with Scripture or with prolegomena. The reason is that God precedes his revelation. This fundamental choice affects all chapters because all parts of this theology are formulated from a theocentric perspective. Under the rubric "The Works of God," Letham discusses creation and providence. He treats eschatology under "The Ultimate Purposes of God." Within the doctrine of God, Letham places the Trinity before the discussion of God's attributes. These emphases remind us of Barth's theology, but Letham treats arguments for God's existence and general revelation before he enters into a discussion of the Trinity, which Barth would have never done.

Second, the main discussion partners reveal the nature of any systematic theology, and Letham's is no exception to that rule. He is clearly well versed in the theology of the early church and Eastern Orthodoxy. Besides Augustine's theology, which one expects in any Western systematic theology, Letham also engages Cyril and Origen, defending the latter against common misunderstandings. It pays off that he has studied Eastern Orthodox theology in earlier works. He often refers to John Meyendorff and offers an extensive, high-quality discussion of theosis (deification) in relation to union with Christ. Of course, Letham quotes John Calvin often but also reaches back to Thomas Aquinas. Remarkably, Karl Barth and T. F. Torrance are among Letham's favorite discussion partners, though he seldom agrees with Barth. In many cases, Letham takes the side of Oliver Crisp against Barth. For instance, he devotes ample attention to Bruce McCormack's claim that Barth argues that God elects to be Triune and to Barth's thesis that God the Son accepted the *fallen* human nature. Typically, he rejects the latter thesis by referring to Crisp's argument.

Thirdly, Letham's work shows a wide range of levels of detail and

contemporary emphases. Some chapters are based on earlier works. These chapters have many footnotes, and the discussion goes into great detail. Examples include the discussion of Scripture as the word of God in relation to the tradition of the church and the section on the necessity of preaching as part of soteriology. Meanwhile, other chapters on the order of salvation refer almost exclusively to biblical texts. Some chapters offer a more general overview than others. Still, the overarching theocentric structure keeps the work together.

As is to be expected in a systematic theology, Letham enters into contemporary debates, such as the status of evolution theory, the possibility of extraterrestrial life, feminism, women's ordination, the New Perspective on Paul, and the theory that the Mosaic covenant is a republication of the covenant of works. Letham is strongest in his discussions of the covenant, evolution, and the interpretation of Genesis, to which he devotes an extensive, nuanced appendix. He strongly opposes theistic evolution but denies that not maintaining the twenty-four-hour-day theory would result in doctrinal decline: Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield showed openness for aspects of evolution but opposed theological liberalism staunchly. On the other hand, his brief discussions of feminism and of the New Perspective on Paul lack nuance. The volume would have been stronger without these sections.

I consider Letham's three (!) chapters on the Trinity to be the strongest of this book. He devotes a chapter to the biblical basis of this doctrine, although he does not process the (admittedly) vast, complete body of secondary literature. In the chapter on the formulations the church adheres to, he shows his mastery of early church sources by rightly defending Origen's basic orthodoxy. He not only highlights perichoresis, which has been in vogue among social Trinitarians, but also the *taxis*, or order, of the Trinitarian persons. The third chapter on the Trinity discusses ongoing questions, such as the term *person* and the *filioque* clause (one of Letham's earlier studies that are inserted in this book). Still, his treatment of the recent debate whether or not the Son is eternally subordinated to the Father is strange: he inserts an e-mail he once wrote to someone who asked him questions arising from a book he had not read. Letham obviously regards the matter as less relevant but could at least have stated his position more clearly. More often, he leaves it to the reader to draw conclusions.

As always, the chapters on eschatology are among the most interesting. Letham rejects premillennialism but sees little distinction between post-millennialism and amillennialism, which he favors. He is very critical of dispensationalism. He has high expectations for Israel once Israel converts. However, the living voice of Israel in our time is absent from this book.

Letham rejects universalism and defends the reality of hell as a place of everlasting, conscious punishment. He even regards the preaching of the reality of hell as “a litmus test of the church’s faithfulness.” Letham does have some consideration for pastoral problems that can arise, and he discusses counterarguments, though not always convincingly.

The expectation that a systematic theology by a presbyterian like Letham would offer a large portion on the covenant is met. In these chapters, as in the chapter on sin and some others, the discussion is mainly historical and less theological. He does not take into account recent studies on the nature of (original) sin. All in all, the method is a hybrid. On the one hand, his systematic theology is theocentric, with the Trinity as the entry point and cornerstone. Given his many references to Barth and Torrance, this may well reflect their influence. Torrance’s work on the incarnation is among the most cited in the book. On the other hand, Letham includes proofs for the existence of God and general revelation and consistently takes the side of argumentations from analytical philosophy. Still, he does not offer much analytical theology himself but primarily engages in historical theology. Also, the dialogue with biblical scholars only surfaces when doctrinal issues such as the New Perspective on Paul or Meredith Kline’s republication theory are involved.

Every chapter of this book closes with study questions and suggestions for further reading. Sometimes, he mentions several substantive titles, but in other cases, he only references Calvin’s *Institutes* or the Westminster Standards. Whether Letham’s systematic theology is distinctive enough to serve as a textbook for students remains to be seen. His chapters on the Trinity surely deserve to.

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