

BOOK REPORT

"INTRODUCING THEOLOGICAL METHOD (A Survey of Contemporary Theologians and Approaches)"

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TITLE OF BOOK: "Introducing Theological Method" ("A Survey of Contemporary Theologians and Approaches")

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FIRST IMPRESSIONS:

When you pick up this book and look at its Title, "Introducing Theological Method", and read the comments of the commenting experts which appear on the reverse cover, your initial impression is going to be: "This Book will teach me about what a Theological Method is, and how I can develop one and use one". If that is your impression, it will, in my opinion, be an erroneous one. True, the author, Ms. Veeneman, does provide a general description of Theological Methods and a description of the importance of a good Theological Method in carrying out proper theological studies, and she does provide excellent descriptions of the theologies, sometimes startling differing theologies, of some of the giants of contemporary theology, but if the reader is expecting to learn, from this book, about a practical, nuts and bolts approach to a Theological Method, he or she will find himself or herself to be somewhat disappointed. I don't think he or she will find an answer to what might be his or her logical question based on the Book's Title, "Ok, Theological Method is very important to proper Theology, now how do I develop one, and how do I use it?" The answer to that question is not in this book.

"Cont. Theo" Does this.

Bummer

That said, this book does provide the reader with an introduction to the importance of a Good, with an emphasis on "Good" Theological Method to the proper performance of Theological Studies. It also demonstrates, through its author's excellent survey of the writings and conclusions of the giants of contemporary Theology, how even the theological conclusions of these truly scholarly, learned, thoughtful, Christ Loving Christian thinkers have differed, sometimes startlingly, over recent times, because of their differing Theological Methods, although the author, in most cases, does not provide a nuts and bolts description of each individual's actual "method", so much as she does describe their basic "approaches" if you will, to the Theological Project.

So, what can the reader expect to get from this very well written, and scholarly researched and thought out book? In my opinion, the answer to this question depends upon the situation and needs of the individual reader. For

Example:

1) If he or she is what I might refer to as a "seriously thinking Christian", as opposed to a Christian who simply shows up in church or maybe in small groups and is willing to accept, perhaps blindly, what he or she is told or hears or even reads about the Christian faith or the doctrines of his or her particular Christian Tradition (but rather is one who really wants to try to think through and know the truth or falsity or partial truth or falsity of what he or she is told, hears or reads), then this book will provide an excellent starting point for the development of a good theological thought process (we can call it "theological method") for this "thinking Christian."

2) If the reader is a serious student, whether in a formal seminary or in a true "study group" or in a class offered by a Christian institute, then this book will provide him or her with a great introduction to: a) the need to develop a good Theological Method, b) the sources to be used in implementing that Method, c) the differing results, sometimes hugely differing results in theological conclusions or church doctrines which will result from differing Theological Methods, and c) a survey of the theologies of (and differing theological methods and approaches and conclusions of) great, rather contemporary Christian thinkers some of whose names appear on the cover of the book, including, by way of example only, Karl Barth (believed by some to be the giant among Protestant theologians), Karl Rahner (who is perceived to occupy a similar position among Catholics), George Lindbeck, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and the Evangelical Theologians, Mifflard Erickson, Stanley Grenz, Kevin Vanhoozer and Clark Pinnock (and it is really startling to see how the approaches and conclusions of these evangelicals differ). *from.*

3) If the reader is a student who is seeking to get a good, solid introduction to the theologies, perhaps methods, and conclusions (with a survey of some of their writings) of these giants of contemporary theology, then this book provides a wonderful such introduction. If the reader wants to see some startling contrasts in theology, he or she should read the materials in this book about Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, or even those about the evangelical scholars, Stanley Grenz and Kevin Vanhoozer.

(As side note, one cannot help but note how the theologies of, and theological conclusions and approaches of these good, God Loving, Christ seeking and loving, extremely learned, hard studying individuals differ, sometimes in dramatic ways. The survey provided by the author in this book adds credence to the statement: "Good Theology involves Hard Work", or, perhaps to the statement that "God is tolerant of differing conclusions about theology, and about His revelations to humanity of His desires for their actions". The survey of the theologies of the various thinkers provided by the author of this book demonstrate the need for the exercise of caution in expressing conclusions that someone's well through out, diligently pursued theological

conclusions are flat wrong or perhaps even heretical. Before we can express such a conclusion we need to do our own serious theological work, and this work requires the use of a Good Theological Method, facts which the author of this book emphasizes and then demonstrates to be true. For example, Clark Pinnock, whose work is surveyed in this book, and who is an evangelical theologian of note, and one noted for "not being afraid to change his mind", came to have some belief in "Open Theology", a Theology which he shares with Greg Boyd and one which has been generally rejected in evangelicalism and Protestantism, generally. Is he a heretic? In reading the author's materials about him, it is rather hard to come to that conclusion. He might well be wrong, but he is at least trying to think through theological issues in a scholarly manner.)

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK'S CONTENTS (WHAT IS THE AUTHOR DOING WITH WHAT SHE IS SAYING AND THE BOOK IS SAYING):

Obviously this book is one about Theological Method and about the importance of having a "Good" Theological Method, but why do we even care about whether one has such a Method or about whether it is a good one? Well, like it or not, every church going Christian is being fed theology in the church services. Every attendee at a "Bible Study" is, in one form, doing theology. Every one of us is, in one sense or another, a "theologian" but are we Good Theologians? If "Theology" is what we sometimes say that it is, "The Study of God", or "the Study of God's Revelations of Himself, His Character and Nature and His Desires for How We Relate to Him and Each Other and His Creation" then is it not rather obvious that we must do good and proper Theology? If that is the case, then the author of this book correctly emphasizes the necessity for Good Theology of having and using a Good Theological Method. She hammers home this message by showing, by way of her surveys of their work, the differing theologies of and theological conclusions of numerous, giant, contemporary theologians. She does not draw conclusions about the propriety of any of their theologies, methods or conclusions, but she does clearly demonstrate how theological conclusions and basic theologies will differ, dependent upon the Theological Method or basic Theological approaches, which are utilized by the individual theologian.

Some important examples of the author's conclusions or statements, are as follows:

1) Theological Method Generally: Theological Method is a starting point (as she puts it, a work of prolegomena) for theological study, as it covers the sources, the starting points for theological study, and the initial questions to be approached by such a study. That method sets the ground rules for how theology is tied to the world around it, what texts are to be read, what sources are to be considered, how they are to be interpreted, and what questions are to be asked. Theological Method drives how theological questions are to be asked, and what sources are to be consulted in answering these questions, and, if one of those sources are various texts, including, of course, the Biblical text, then how are those texts to be read and what weight should be given to them.

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2) Primary Sources of Theological Method or Theological Reflection and Study: Classically, Theologians have generally considered the sources of theology to be (and agreed that such sources are):

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-Scripture/The Bible
-Human Reason or Human Reasoning
-Church Traditions
-Individual and corporate religious or spiritual
experiences.

In fact, John Wesley, has incorporated each of these sources into the legs or points of what is called the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral". While there is general agreement on these sources as being proper sources for theological reflection, there has been and is a difference of opinion, in fact, sometimes, a huge difference of opinion among theologians (including those surveyed in this book) over the weight to be given to each of these individual sources in the theological reflection project, or in the manner in which each should be used (or used at all) in such project. Some of the theologians have added additional sources, such as "community" or the "reflections or doctrines of the individual church community" (e.g. Stanley Grenz), or individual church doctrines (e.g.

George Lindbeck), or contemporary social problems or issues (e.g. the Political Theologies, and Liberation Theologies surveyed in this book), as being proper or necessary sources or beginning points for the theological reflection project. Even where the Bible is considered to be the primary source of Theological reflection/study, or the normative source for such reflection/study, there are substantial differences of opinion as to the weight to be given to this source, or the manner in which this source is to be interpreted or applied. Truly, some of the theologians whose work is surveyed by the author in this book have fundamentally differing ways in which they approach the Bible as being the first pillar of theological reflection. For example, Millard Erickson, a conservative, very orthodox Evangelical theologian, approaches the Bible using what might be called the "propositional approach" or "systematic theological approach", whereby he treats the Bible as being the essential, primary source of theology, and finds therein "propositions, which help to define God and the tenets for Christian Living. The other Evangelical theologians, who are surveyed in this book, Stanley Grenz, Kevin Vanhoozer and Clark Pinnock, reject this "propositionalist", if you will, approach, but then they differ among themselves over how scripture is to be used in theological work.

3) Author's Summary Statement for the Need for a "Good" (a word which she emphasizes) Theological Method: Regardless of the reasons why one takes up theological work, or what one's needs for that work might be "...knowing the reasons for doing theological work is only the first step-it is important to also spend some time thinking about *how* theological work should be done, or what *theological method* should be. We must ask some key questions about method: Where should we begin? What sources should be used? What specific questions should we ask?"

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4) The Bible as a Source for Theological Method: The author states that "All Christian theologians will argue that the Bible is important, but they will differ on exactly what role the Bible should have....One need only look at the history of Christianity and the breadth of contemporary Christianity to know that not all Christians read the Bible in the same way. Despite claims about the Bible being self-interpreting, it seems that there often isn't an immediately apparent plain reading of the text....If the text does not convey clear meaning apart from interpretation, then one's interpretation must also play a role in understanding. If that is the case, something is added to the biblical text in order to gain meaning from it. The question that arises from the necessity of interpretation is what informs one's interpretation....Many people today would ask if it is actually possible to have a theology that is based on the Bible alone. If it isn't, then what other sources can help theologians to better understand revelation?" As noted above, such additional sources can include:

- church tradition, meaning the traditions of one's individual church and of the Church generally, including the history of the Church generally or of one's individual church tradition,
- possibly "community" including the community of the general Church of all Christians and/or the community of one's individual church or church tradition,
- human reason or reasoning, including the General Revelation provided by nature and the sciences, and the reasoning provided or supported by history, anthropology, and philosophy,
- human historical experiences
- individual and/or corporate religious or spiritual experience.

Moving
Beyond

the
Bible?

5) Orienting Questions: Regardless of one's sources for theological reflection or one's theological method, there are two additionally important considerations for proper theology, those of the orienting questions and starting point:

Slaves,
Women,
& ...

-Orienting Questions-"the questions that drive a particular thinker's theological approach...(which)...might be about the needs of the contemporary context, the philosophical basis for theological assertions, the claims of the tradition, or the claims of the biblical text."

-While Orienting Questions can be a part of one's "Starting Point", one's Starting Point can differ, somewhat, from his or her Orienting Questions. For example, Karl Rahner essentially began his work with the human being and the human being's capacity or innate propensity to receive revelation. Rahner started with the human being or humanity and his/her, its relationship to the divine. Karl Barth protested, vigorously, against this approach or starting point, seeing it as anthropocentrism (human-centeredness) in its approach, vested in nineteenth-century protestant liberalism, and, as a result, his starting point for theology started with God and the Word of God and not the human being.

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Having stated some of these general conclusions about the importance of one's Theological Method and what one's sources for, and orienting questions and starting points for one's theological reflections might or should be, the author then goes on to survey the theologies or theological conclusions or methodologies of a substantial number of prominent theologians, whom she places in various classifications, including:

-Neo-orthodox Theologies, both Catholic and Protestant, such as Avery Dulles, Karl Barth, and Wolfhart Pannenberg,

-Theologies of Correlation (fundamentally interested in dialogue, including that between the church and the broader world, and between theology and the other disciplines, including philosophy, literature, the social sciences or natural sciences), and these theologians include Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan,

-Postliberal Theologies (from the last part of the 20th century), that seeks to avoid the pitfalls of propositionalism and the reliance on experience that characterizes liberalism and also asks questions about religion and culture in a different way), these theologians including Paul Lindbeck (he announces what is called "rule theory" which emphasizes "doctrines"), and Hans Frei.

-Evangelical Theologies, which emphasize growth of one's lived religion or faith, and one's connections to and devotion to God, oftentimes through the form of a personal relationship with God and emphasis on a life of piety. (These theologians include the conservative Millard Erickson who seems to emphasize systematic theology through propositionalism, Stanley Grenz, Kevin Vanhoozer (and Grenz and Vanhoozer's approaches differ from each other, somewhat remarkably), and Clark Pinnock (who, being famed for being able to change his mind, developed a belief in Open Theology).

-Political Theologies, including Vatican II, which emphasize the need for justice for the poor and abused, and the weak, and which include "Black Theology" and "Feminist Theology", or what are sometimes called "Liberation Theologies."

-Theologies of Religious Pluralism and Comparative Theologies.

The author, without drawing any personal conclusions on her part, ultimately points out how the theologies and theological methods, theological

sources, orienting questions and starting points of these surveyed theologians differ and how their resulting theologies and conclusions differ, emphasizing the need for a development of a Good Theological Method for any theological student.

PERSONAL MUSINGS/HOW DID THIS BOOK BENEFIT ME: I am most certainly not a trained theological scholar, or minister or member of the clergy, and it is unlikely that I will write or publish some ground breaking text on some theological matter. So, of what use to me is this book? Well, in a nutshell, it points and out and emphasizes that which I already knew to be true, which is that when I read or hear some statement which purports to be "The Christian Truth" or

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"God's Truth", or "God's demands for a Christian or a church", and I am "not all that sure that such is the case", I need to, before jumping to conclusions that such, in fact, is or is not the case, make a personal "Christian Study" if you will, to inform my conclusions about that which has been said or which I have read. "Thinking Christians", and I hope that I am one, should avoid jumping to conclusions about what is said (particularly in church) or read, and most certainly in expressing conclusions about such matters which might be harmful to church unity, without doing the necessary theological work in order to determine whether or not such "conclusions" are theologically sound, or are right or wrong. Sure, we can all have opinions, but, when it comes to theology those conclusions should be ones that are sounded in sound theology, which is based in a Good, Solid, Theological Method that utilizes proper sources, starting points and orienting questions. So, this book is a reminder of that fact. Now, for others, who are noted above, this book can provide a valuable resource in other areas.

As a purely personal note, I have to say that I find that the theologies or theological methods of some of the "non-evangelical theologians", such as Karl Barth, for example, and of the "conservative evangelical theologian", Millard Erickson, to be a lot easier to understand and likely to teach or implement, than the evangelical theologies (which seem to me to be nebulous at best and somewhat without any defined rigor) of Stanley Grenz and Kevin Vanhoozer. At least I can understand, and could teach the general theologies and methods of Barth, and Erickson, and some of the others, but I am not sure I would have a clue in trying to personally use, or much less instruct others in the Grenz or Vanhoozer theologies.

Agreed.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK: I don't think that every reader needs to read this book from front cover to back cover, as I don't that every reader needs to absorb the somewhat difficult to absorb information about every theologian whose work is surveyed by the book's author. That said, I would suggest that the potential reader:

- start with the author's excellent Introduction,
- then move to Chapter 1, "the Work of Theology"
- then move to the Last Chapter, "Conclusion, Where Do

*We Go From Here?"

-and then, depending on the reader's particular needs or interests or even his or her particular tradition (for example, is he or she an evangelical or working in an evangelical church) moving to the chapter which surveys the theologians of his or her particular area of interest or tradition (I would note that I think that evangelicals need to be apprised of the differing theological approaches of some of its prominent theologians, Millard Erickson, Stanley Grenz, Kevin Vanhoozer and Clark Pinnock and I would recommend that they read the chapter on the Evangelical Theologies).

At this point I think this book can be placed on the shelf for future reference material.

Very helpful

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CONTRIBUTIONS (OF WHAT BENEFIT MIGHT THIS BOOK BE, IF ANY, FOR A CLASS SUCH AS THOSE OFFERED IN TEL, OR OF WHAT BENEFIT MIGHT IT BE FOR THE STAFF OF A CHURCH OR AN INSTITUTE SUCH AS TEL, OR FOR THE STUDENTS OF SOME SEMINARY OR CLASS OFFERED BY AN INSTITUTE SUCH AS TEL?:

This is a somewhat difficult question to answer. I think this book would be of great benefit, as an introductory text if nothing more, for any theological student, or for anyone who wants to somehow "do theology". Those folks need to have an introduction to just what a "Theological Method is", Why it is Important, What the Sources it might utilize are, and How Theology has been used, over the decades, by prominent theologians. But that said, this book is simply an "introduction" to these matters. It is far from a complete text as to any of these matters, and, in particular is not a complete nuts and bolts text, which would advise one in the personal development and use of his or her personal theological method. In that respect, and while I have always heard the statement "your theological method is important", and I have learned of the sources for such a method, including those emphasized by the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, I have always wondered, "Ok, how do I develop and use such a method?" In some respects, I wonder whether courses for Emerging Church Leaders should start with one of the legs of theological method, meaning the Bible and interpretation of the Bible, or rather whether they should start with a general overall view of theology, in general, and theological method in general, and then go on to possibly expound on the use of one of the sources of theology, meaning the Bible and its interpretation. Yes, we all agree, the Bible is essential to, or is likely the starting point and guiding light for any theology, but it is not, as this book points out, the only source for theology, and it is not always used in theology (including by evangelicals if we read Erickson, Grenz, Vanhoozer and Pinnock), in the same manner, by prominent theologians. Maybe classes for Emerging Church Leaders should start with basic theology, and with assisting them in developing a personal theological method, and then move on to the use or interpretation of one of the sources to be used in that method, the Bible.

Respectfully Submitted:

Dan Simon

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Good
That's.
Look to
hear more