

Book reviews

doi:[10.1017/S0036930617000618](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930617000618)

B. A. Gerrish, *Christian Faith: Dogmatics in Outline* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), pp. xv + 353, \$50.00/32.99.

Brian Gerrish's long anticipated dogmatics does not disappoint. *Christian Faith* is a work of great learning and wisdom, the fruit of Gerrish's lifelong immersion in the major currents of Christian theology from the biblical witness to the present. Although especially attentive to Calvin and Schleiermacher – and eager to rescue them from caricature – Gerrish concisely and fairly engages a wide range of theological positions, while setting forth his own position. The result is a book that is almost encyclopedic in breadth, a reliable guide for understanding particular disputes in the history of Christian doctrine.

Christian Faith is equally important for its way of thinking theologically. In Gerrish's understanding, theological reflection depends on sustained conversation with the past. Dogmatic theologians should not simply repeat – or demand allegiance to – particular formulations of belief handed down from the scriptures, church creeds or confessions, or great teachers and thinkers of the tradition. But neither will they start from their own experience or social location. Rather, the task of dogmatics is a 'critical testing' of inherited dogma 'in the light of the dual criteria of fidelity to the Word and pertinence to the ever-changing situation of the church' (p. 258).

This three-dimensional definition bears explication. First, dogmatics engages inherited dogma rather than trying to ground itself in scripture alone or, in contrast, in a philosophical viewpoint independent of scripture or the teachings of the Christian tradition. Dogmatic theologians engage the history of dogma because in it they discern the distinctive way of seeing and living in the world that has characterised the Christian faith over the centuries. Historically, theologians have employed different conceptual frameworks in response to different intellectual and social challenges, but even when they not recognised the limitations of their particular formulations, they have often articulated a key dimension of life in Christ that continues to illuminate Christian thought and experience today. Gerrish seeks to learn from all sides, as in his discussion of infant baptism.

Second, dogmatics tests inherited dogma against the apostolic witness of the scriptures. The two testaments present us with a picture of a God who has created a world with order and meaning. In Christ, we encounter one who remained conscious of this God in every dimension of life and death. Gerrish's own readings of scripture are sensitive, extended and foundational to each dogmatic locus. While appreciative of historical criticism, Gerrish is interested not in establishing (or challenging) the historicity of particular biblical events but rather in entering into their distinctive vision of faith and life. This 'apostolic witness' establishes a criterion for evaluating particular theological movements in the history of dogma, which have sometimes distorted the Christian faith or have emphasised one dimension of it at the expense of, or even in avert opposition to, others – as in the Reformation-era debates between Protestants and Catholics about justification.

Third, dogmatics clarifies Christian faith in light of contemporary thought and experience. Particular dogmatic formulations that made sense in the past may be misleading in the present, which has been shaped by other assumptions about reality. Gerrish explores fundamental changes not only in scientific understanding of the world but also in cultural sensitivities, as in relation to penal substitution theories of atonement, whose picture of an angry God who demands a sacrifice is repulsive to many people today. Again, Gerrish's principal concern is to delineate the character of Christ's God-consciousness, so that it may more fully shape the church and its witness.

Christian Faith skilfully explores the dynamic interrelations among the three dimensions of dogmatic theology. The history of dogma makes us better readers of scripture, even as the apostolic witness to Christ helps us evaluate inherited dogma. Contemporary scientific and cultural understandings of life and the world stimulate reformulation of church doctrine, while the Christian vision of life clarifies what Gerrish calls the 'elemental faith' on which secular knowledge rests. As a 'dogmatics in outline', *Christian Faith* does not develop its constructive points extensively, but it does suggest key trajectories for further reflection.

Two matters, in particular, call for greater consideration. First, moving along the lines of Schleiermacher's thinking, Gerrish resists speaking of a God who intervenes from the outside into history, and Gerrish does not see belief in miracles as essential to Christian faith (although he is not closed to the possibility of parapsychological phenomena). But that the apostolic picture of the historic Christ steadily transmits itself through the church's preaching, sacraments and way of life together, and powerfully reshapes people's consciousness and piety, is itself, if true, a miracle of sorts in which one can only believe, given so much evidence to the contrary. To be sure, Gerrish is writing dogmatic theology, not a sociological treatise. Still, some

readers will be mystified by his lack of attention to the decline of the church in the West and how often church ministry today succumbs to models of business management and entrepreneurship. While he carefully attends to feminism and religious pluralism, it is striking that he nowhere engages the kinds of questions that Stanley Hauerwas raises (and that many pastors find themselves struggling with).

A second matter is closely related. Gerrish distinguishes the work of dogmatic theology from philosophical theology, apologetics and ethics. While acknowledging that each area has its own questions and methodologies, some readers will nevertheless worry that Gerrish's separation of dogmatics and ethics impoverishes both. *Christian Faith* suggests nothing more than an affectional ethic (*Gesinnungsethik*): confidence that life and the world have meaning, commitment to wholeness of mind and body, gratitude for the good that one is privileged to experience. Gerrish does not attend to the rich literature of recent decades about practices and virtues that help relate these postures to specific forms of discipleship in a morally troubled world.

Despite these reservations, *Christian Faith* is a singular achievement. Christian theologians from a variety of ecclesial traditions and philosophical frameworks will find it clear and compelling. Gerrish inspires every theologian to work more carefully in the history of dogma in order to say something truly theological today.

John P. Burgess

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, PA 15206, USA

jburgess@pts.edu

doi:[10.1017/S0036930617000552](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930617000552)

Theodore Vial, *Modern Religion, Modern Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. xiii + 227.

There is an important connection between religion and race which has gone largely unexplored in the current literature of race; that being the place of race as a grounding reality for the current understanding of religion. With *Modern Religion, Modern Race* Theodore Vial seeks to explore this connection in a novel way. Where most literature approaches the matter from the implicit vantage point of the dominant players in the transatlantic slave trade (England, Holland, Spain and Portugal), thereby privileging racial discourses that ask how religion shapes the construction of the idea of race, this book takes as its starting point an analysis of how the interplay of race and religion also shapes the understanding of religion as an object of study. The work