

[Review for the *Westminster Theological Journal* 74/2 (fall, 2012): 455-456. Used with permission.]

Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and its Interpretation*. London/New York: T. & T. Clark, 2011. Pp. viii + 153. Hardback and paperback.

Scott Swain has provided an excellent book on how to interpret the Bible in harmony with what it is--the word of God. In terms of modern classifications, his work belongs to the realm of theological interpretation of Scripture. But unlike some instances in this genre, Swain's work does not treat theological interpretation as if it were merely focusing on the canon as a historical and sociological product, or defining itself purely within an ecclesiological context. Swain appeals to the trinitarian character of God, God's plan of redemption and progressive revelation, and the nature of the Bible as the very word of God. "The central thesis of this book is that we may best appreciate the theological significance of the Bible and biblical interpretation if we understand these two themes in a trinitarian, covenantal context" (p. 7). The major implication of his work is that *all* interpretation of the Bible should properly take into account its divine authorship and its divine design for our salvation and sanctification.

Swain combines the best of new and old. He shows familiarity with contemporary theological interpretation, but also repeatedly refers to theologians and interpreters of previous centuries, including church fathers, the Reformers, and later Reformed theologians. He recovers the rich practice of reading the Bible as the word of God, characteristic of the church up until the modernist turn in biblical criticism.

The book has five chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. The first chapter focuses on progressive revelation, against the background of the trinitarian character of God. The exposition is appreciative of the biblical theology of Geerhardus Vos and Meredith Kline, and provides an understanding of the organically unified character of Scripture within the context of God's redemptive plan and its progressive unfolding.

The second chapter focuses on the written word of God and its close relation to covenant. In this context Swain also provides a judicious summary of "double agency discourse," that is, that the Bible has dual authorship, divine and human.

The third chapter discusses "The Inspiration and Perfection of Holy Scripture." Swain clearly asserts the inerrancy of Scripture, as an implication of its divine authorship, and indicates its practical implications for how we read Scripture. He also discusses the traditional list of perfections of Scripture: it is authoritative, true, sufficient, and clear (the necessity of Scripture was discussed in the previous chapter). Swain here represents the best of classical Reformed theology. He is nuanced, but yields no ground to modern currents that want partially to escape scriptural authority.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the reception of Scripture by individual readers and the church. Regeneration and illumination are necessary for the proper reception of the word, but are distinguished from Scripture, which has authority even prior to its reception. The chapters show admirable balance in the treatment of the relation of individual readers to the church and the relation of the primary authority of Scripture to subordinate ministerial

authorities--the rule of faith, creeds, pastors, and teachers.

All in all, this book accomplishes admirably what it sets out to do. The remaining question is whether its message will be heeded. Swain perceptively addresses the temptation to cast off biblical authority on the basis of the alleged superiority of modern insights. But addiction to modernity is deeply embedded in contemporary culture. Swain's book has no illusions: its discussion of regeneration acknowledges that resistance to the Bible is deep-seated.

I fear also that the psychological divide between systematic theology and biblical studies will result in improperly confining the book's message to systematicians and practitioners in the "guild" of "theological interpretation." In fact, the book's arguments imply that all biblical interpretation must reckon with theological truth about revelation and Scripture, or else it distorts the very character of the book it is studying. Unfortunately, the current mood within scholarly biblical studies can be very different: the atmosphere can proclaim that any "dogmatic" claims represent "interference" with the "freedom" to interpret texts according to "scholarly principles." Unfortunately, what are called "scholarly principles" may include antibiblical assumptions. Swain's book provides a healthy remedy for any who would listen.

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