

[MJTM 13 (2011–2012)]

BOOK REVIEW

Michael S. Horton. *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011. 1056 pp, Hbk. ISBN 978-0-310-28604-2.

For someone who grew up in a church with an Arminian Baptist theology, Michael Horton shows little affection for any positive features of that tradition. Going only by the evidence of this systematic theology, his attachment to Christianity of the Reformed variety is complete. Horton teaches at the Westminster Seminary California as the J. Gresham Machen professor of apologetics and systematic theology. Divine initiative is central to the organization of all the major sections, and the chapters follow the order of topics standard in many systematic theologies. There are no grand innovations, and that is a strength.

Theologies are written to keep in step with the times and questions of each generation—even of each decade, as shock after shock in contemporary life changes peoples' perceptions of God and the world. Horton's book is written to the Western world at the beginning of the twenty-first century, fully aware of the revolutions in Western worldviews that have reset the theological landscape several times since Karl Barth, Jurgen Moltmann, George Lindbeck, and Paul Ricoeur. Horton has expressed his concern that Christians sometimes rely on systematic theologies of the past. *The Christian Faith* successfully speaks the language of the twenty-first century by addressing some of its intellectual debates and existential concerns. The book has a contemporary style.

Nevertheless, Horton writes consciously in the tradition of Louis Berkhof, Herman Bavinck, Geerhardus Vos, Francis Turretin, and continental Reformed theologians and confessions going back to Luther, but most especially John Calvin. Horton

does not give a centimeter to modernity or post-modernity, in liberal or evangelical guises. In his Westminster Seminary California “Office Hours” website interview, Horton says that because of space constraints, he could not interact with the thought of as many theologians as he would have liked. I had to keep this admission in mind as I read, as I wondered why at various points he did not remember my own favorite writers. In his earlier four-volume dogmatics series, he intentionally dealt with a lot of particular theologians.

Any systematic theology beyond the superficial has to make some choices in response to the questions that face thinking Christians. Even in the Augustinian-Reformed line, there are decisions that distinguish various types. Horton follows a fairly narrow tradition, and so while Augustine and Luther are quoted many times (both have ten lines of references in the index), they are criticized quite often. Zwingli is often wrong. The Pietists are nearly always wrong, as are those who gained from that tradition. The Puritan Richard Baxter, whom most people think of as a moderate Calvinist, is here classed as an Arminian (p. 562). John Calvin is *never* wrong, even in sixteen lines (the maximum) of index references, though toward the end of the book, he is credited with an omission: Calvin made no mention of “discipline” in the definition of the marks of the church (p. 896, n. 41). English Puritans are sparingly represented, Scottish and American Presbyterians are surprisingly rarely quoted, and the hero of American theology, Jonathan Edwards, is corrected in two of the six references he gets. It is also odd in a work by an American, with the huge presence of Baptist churches and institutions in that nation, that Baptists, as Baptists, even theologians thought of as Reformed (A. H. Strong, M. Erickson, Carl Henry), are scarcely brought into discussion until the question of “sacraments” and water baptism in chapters 23 and 24. Contemporaries Stanley Grenz and Wayne Grudem do get a fair amount of attention.

I appreciated the way Horton flows between writers over the centuries in discussing Christian thought, treating second-century contributors as well as twenty-first-century ones, unlike the dissertations that fear to quote any writer earlier than twenty

years ago. He does quote or refer to a great many Christian theologians and movements, giving a context for the theological discussion. The reader can discern the stand he takes and the implications that his stand has for the reader's Christian environment. I like his preference to found the Christian life on *hearing* the Word, before we *see* the Lord and the truth. It is an interesting suggestion that Adam was intended to have driven the tempter out of Eden. I am also happy to see Reformation confessions and articles of faith treated extensively and with respect.

Horton is no ecumenist, however; apart from two general references to the Swiss Brethren's "Schleitheim Confession" and five general references to the Anglican "Thirty-Nine Articles" (and one to a specific article), all the quotes are to Reformed or Lutheran confessions up to those of Westminster. The post-Vatican II *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is quoted at key points as well, to illustrate errors. Horton hardly acknowledges theological work outside of the Greek and Latin ("European") tradition. One looks in vain for reflections on majority world theology.¹ In a time when most readers are meeting members of world religions, it is odd that, for example, Islamic thought is barely mentioned. As a result, perhaps, reflection on the Scriptures that led to and resulted from the modern missions movement is weakly presented. His main use of Matt 28:19–20 is to support a clerical and sacramental view of the means of grace—a continuation of Calvin's blindness toward that passage.

Horton debates Karl Barth extensively, approving and disapproving freely.² Obviously Barth is an influential Reformed theologian who addresses many Reformed issues, which Horton cannot ignore. Horton also frequently debates Roman Catholic theology in its Thomist, Tridentine, and Vatican II varieties.

1. Seyoon Kim, Sung Wook Chung, Allen Boesak, John de Gruchy and Ajith Fernando are mentioned, all in footnotes. All except Fernando are Reformed-related scholars. Only the two South Africans are quoted, to suggest that probably Pietism was behind apartheid theology.

2. E.g., Barth is considered in pp. 317–22, while an Arminian view on predestination gets seven lines, pp. 313–12.

Popular evangelical movements and writers are given less attention. On p. 776, Charles Ryrie and Wayne Grudem receive a paragraph each (Brian McLaren is in a footnote) after four pages of discussion of the Roman Catholic doctrine of sacraments. The ordinance of washing of the saints' feet, mostly practiced by Anabaptists, is not mentioned. Horton readily points out Reformed theology's disagreements with many traditions and theologians, but he is never harsh about it, unlike the sixteenth-century Reformers, including Calvin, who routinely denounced the motives of those they disagreed with. One notices lists of traditions and movements that are lumped together as in error, however (e.g., p. 769: "Anabaptists, Socinians, Arminians, neonomians, mystics and rationalists were united in their opposition to . . .").

I was early on made uneasy by repeated references to the errors of "radical" Anabaptists, whose errors are mentioned far more frequently than the index credits. Who are these radicals? On p. 68 they are like Thomas Muntzer and on p. 925, they are those who took over the city of Munster. The mass of Mennonites are passed over. Thomas Finger is taken as representing modern Mennonites (he who ignored the Sermon on the Mount in his own systematic theology)³ and Menno Simons mentioned once, only to be picked on for his idiosyncratic "celestial flesh" theology (p. 471). This is not fair to Anabaptism in general. Horton repeats the general condemnations of the magisterial Reformers as if no re-evaluations of Anabaptist theology have been made since the sixteenth century.

Although he presents in fresh form the Reformation theology of Calvin and the European Reformed, Horton does make extensive use of a theme of Orthodox theology, the notion of God's "energies" that many first heard of from Kallistos (Timothy) Ware's *The Orthodox Church*. Even here Calvin, apparently, anticipated Horton (p. 130). Between God's essence and God's creatures, there is the category of God's activity. Horton frequently appeals to the old analogy of the sun,

³ Timothy Paul Erdel, "Holiness among the Mennonites," *Reflections* 10, nos. 1/2 (2008) 12–16.

sunshine, and the effect of the sunlight, warming and illuminating the earth, and allowing us to see. Modern astronomy challenges the definition of the sun as merely extending to the edge of the photosphere, and not including its corona, magnetic field and solar atmosphere or wind. We can admit that analogies, even this one, have their weaknesses and still accept that there is a definite boundary between God and all that is not-God. The working of the sun is an aspect of the sun, not identical with the sun, nor the effects of the sun. Horton uses the idea of energies to help explain the doctrines of revelation and its result—the written Word of God: the Scriptures are not God in essence or emanation, yet they are not merely creaturely as many evangelicals seem to be emphasizing these days. Similarly, Horton applies the energies concept to such doctrines as God’s simplicity and immutability, and the doctrine of union with Christ.

From my esteem for theologians Donald Bloesch, G. C. Berkhouwer, Francis Schaeffer, James I. Packer, John Stott, and Leon Morris, and my long use of Calvin’s own commentaries, I expected I would want to debate some, but not a lot of Horton’s theology. As it turned out, I was feeling my disagreement rising in nearly every chapter except those directly on the Person of Jesus Christ (chs. 14–16). In Horton’s view, almost nothing has been learned since the sixteenth century. Augustine’s blunder over the parable of the wheat and the weeds (in fact, Jesus said the field was the *world*, not the church—Matt 13:38) is repeated several times. It is not surprising that the notion of covenant is overworked. (I am unconvinced there is a covenant of works in Genesis chapters 1–3, for example. Here Horton has to disagree with fellow Westminster theologian John Murray, p. 420.) Horton did agree in the online interview that covenant is not the whole of theology—yet it is the most frequently mentioned theme (sixteen lines in the index, and not all references are in the index) and permeates nearly every discussion. Curiously, covenant is not explicit in the eschatology section.

Concerning another issue, the grammar of Eph 2:8–9 does not say that faith is the gift of God. Horton concedes after a long discussion, that “In some sense, faith may be considered a

condition of receiving Christ and all of his benefits” (p. 617). I’d like to hear that “may be” preached! The apostasy passages of Hebrews are slipped past without argument (p. 869). These are old debates perhaps, but they are presented as practically unchallenged. Against the modern consensus, Horton does not believe in “every member” ministry, preferring the KJV punctuation of Eph 4:11–12, (pp. 538, 858).

On the other hand, I share his misgivings about the theology of dispensationalists, the “emergent church,” and the “missional church” movements. I agree that God is certainly the one who acts in salvation, and mystics who replace that with climbing up steps to God are surely mistaken. I am with him in the indispensable place for propositions in theology. I believe, with Horton and many other traditions, including Anabaptism and Methodism, that the Bible has a place for a connective Christianity wider than the life of the congregation. Because I am sad at the continued disparagement of plain verbal preaching in a visually idolatrous age, I am encouraged by the prominent place Horton gives to preaching. In eschatology, he is wise to use the “already, not yet” key to interpreting prophecies of the last things. This avoids speculation.

This is a major new systematic theology text. It is nicely laid out. There is a suitable glossary that needs only a few more terms to help me (e.g., common sense realism, infusion, marks of the church, means of grace, ordinance, prevenient grace). There are many indexes. The book summarizes and updates the language of Calvin and the continental Reformed churches. It should be able to replace Louis Berkhof as a classroom standard for those who follow the Westminster Confession or the continental Reformed system. There are useful question sets after each chapter that go to the heart of the issues in the text. I have major disagreements with the system, but if you like this system, you will like this book.

J. Clare Fuller
Kitchener, Ontario