

[Two Books on Theology, Sangre de Cristo Seminary Library. Unpublished]

Two Books on Theology

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Essential Christianity by Walter R. Martin
Zondervan, 1962; \$1.95
and

A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion by J. Oliver Buswell, Jr.
Zondervan, 1962; \$6.95

The first book, *A Handbook of Basic Christian Doctrines*, is easy and short. Of the 114 pages 12 pages are front material and between the chapters there are always three blank pages.

The chapters on the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, Sovereign Grace, and the Error of Universal Salvation are fairly good. In discussing the Atonement the author stresses its vicarious aspect very well, but on the essential point that Christ's death satisfied divine justice, he is somewhat less than enthusiastic.

While his account of the Trinity is satisfactory (always remembering the brevity of the book), he blunders on the Divinity of Christ. Possibly influenced by the kenotic theories of the last century he writes, "Christ did not exercise three prime attributes of Deity while on earth prior to his Resurrection. These were Omniscience, Omnipotence, and Omnipresence," (pp. 28-29). But Matthew 11:27 shows his omniscience and omnipotence while on earth; Mat. 18:20 and John 3:13 show his omnipresence: John 8:58 showing his eternity and Heb. 1:8-12, 13:8 showing his immutability, imply that Christ did not become less than God when he came to earth. The author should have said that in his human nature Christ is neither omniscient nor omnipotent; but it is untrue to say that Christ (in his divine nature) was not omniscient while on earth.

The final chapter, *The Unanswerable Argument*, is a confused apologetic. Concerning a Christian's attempt to bear witness to unbelievers the author says, "In the end he must rely primarily upon the Scriptures" (p. 110). This is excellent, but apparently it is not "the end" for he continues, "If they are denied as an authoritative revelation, he finds himself driven to the last citadel—personal experience."

Now, he might have said that the last citadel is an appeal to the Holy Spirit to regenerate the unbeliever: but we consider it inimical to the evangelical position to make personal experience superior to the Word of God. This is the point at which Schleiermacher came in and a hundred years of

modernism.

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Dr. Buswell's larger book of 430 pages (Vol. I of a set), has been caustically reviewed by Professor Oswald T. Allis, who charges him, among other things, with denying the verbal and plenary inspiration of the Scriptures. It is certain that on this point Dr. Allis is mistaken. His mistake arises, in my opinion, from the stress Dr. Buswell lays on “the inerrancy of the meaning which the inspired writers intended to convey in their original manuscripts” (pp. 207-8, in italics). This careless phraseology suggests that God inspired the thought of intention of the apostles, but not the words. The orthodox doctrine is of course that God inspired both the thought and the words. It would have been better, had Dr. Buswell put more emphasis on the inspiration of the words.

Unfortunately there is room for considerable misunderstanding of Dr. Buswell's book. For example, he explicitly repudiates the orthodox doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son (pp. 106-112). Dr. Buswell does not intend to deny the Deity of Christ nor his eternal sonship; but how one can consistently retain eternal sonship without eternal generation is difficult to understand. So far as the words are concerned, *generation* is no more anthropomorphic than is *Son*.

Dr. Buswell, however, seems to find difficulty in anything eternal. The heading on page 41 is: *Eternity is Not Timelessness*. To support his heading he points out God's dealing with men in time, and concludes “Nothing could be farther from the Scriptural teaching than the notion that God's eternity means that he is totally disconnected from finite events in time.” Well, of course. Neither Hodge, nor Calvin, nor even Thomas asserted that God is totally disconnected from events in time. Dr. Buswell's premises do not support the conclusion in his heading.

Pursuing the matter further, Dr. Buswell quotes Geerhardus Vos, apparently with the intention of claiming that Vos denied God's eternity or timelessness. In exegeting Isa. 57:15 Vos said, “'The Lofty One that inhabits eternity.' It is probable, however, that the clause should be rendered 'who sits enthroned forever,' which would retain the time-form expression.” But what Dr. Buswell failed to quote from Vos is his further remark on Isa. 57:15: “In popular language, such as the prophets use, eternity can only be expressed in terms of time, although in reality it lies altogether above time.” Vos therefore holds to the orthodox position.

Dr. Buswell also uses Vos on the point that human existence in heaven is not timeless, to conclude that God is not timeless. But, obviously, since we do not become God when we get to heaven, our time sequences in heaven are not evidence as to God's nature and attributes.

In conjunction with a very personalized interpretation of Thomas Aquinas, Dr. Buswell denies that God is completely actual and asserts that he is to some degree potential. Now, to be potential, in Thomas's terminology, is to be undeveloped and imperfect, a state which requires an external cause of development. Dr. Buswell even quotes, "the potential is that which does not yet exist" (p. 77). Can Dr. Buswell really mean that God in some degree does not yet exist?

Later he betrays confusion as to the person of Christ. In discussing the origin of the soul—traducianism verses creationism—he asserts three times that Christ had a sinless body—a peculiar emphasis; and then he continues by saying that the eternal Son became a human person without ceasing to be a divine Person (p. 251). This looks like the Nestorian heresy; the worlds clearly are in conflict with the creed of Chalcedon. But the meaning or intention behind the world is almost certainly not Nestorian; for in the same paragraph where it is said that Jesus was both a human person and a divine person, Dr. Buswell also says that no new personal being came into existence.

A number of additional examples could be cited to justify the conclusion that on the whole Vol. I (this review does not cover Vol. II) is a distressing book.