

REVIEW ARTICLE

Liberal Protestant Dogmatics Today

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Christian Faith: Dogmatics in Outline, B. A. Gerrish, WJK, 2015 (ISBN 978-0-664-25698-2), xv + 353 pp., pb \$50

A Theology for the Twenty-First Century, Douglas F. Ottati, Eerdmans, 2020 (ISBN 978-0-8028-7811-3), xxx + 770 pp., hb \$60

Abstract

In this article, I review two recent works in the tradition of liberal Protestant dogmatics, taking a close look at some of the theological rationale, while pointing to the specific argumentative claims as they unfold in interpretations of the classic dogmatic topics. By showing how the sources of theology, as well as the Incarnation, Resurrection, Christology, the Trinity, the Sacraments, and eschatology, are interpreted, the specific theological profile of liberal Protestant theology as a general approach to theology becomes clear. The plurality of impressions in the dynamic of reception, which the theology itself partially evokes, is also presented in the conclusion. Finally, I remark on the future of liberal Protestant theology, arguing that generous orthodoxy may be one of its new homes.

Key Words: Kant, Schleiermacher, liberal Protestantism, Incarnation, Resurrection, Christology, Trinity

For its entire history up to this day, liberal theology (if one thinks of it as a unified tradition) has been attacked by conservative Protestants (and Catholics) of all stripes. It has been rejected as Pelagian, heretical, heterodox, or simply non-Christian. Kant has probably harvested the most criticisms over the centuries for developing a rationalist and moral form of the faith. In recent debates about Kant and Christianity, the accusatory tone is gone. Yet the fundamental analysis of his system as non-Christian has lived on in new forms. Christopher J. Insole has recently argued that 'Kant does not even manage the base-line Christianity requisite to qualify as a Christian heretic. And if Kant were to move closer to Christianity, he

would become internally inconsistent, and he knows this, and avoids it'.¹ This reading of Kant raises questions about a popular path taken by many liberal Protestants over the last two centuries: the assertion of a harmony between Christianity and the Kantian system, and beyond this the affirmation of Christianity from the standpoint of Kant's system. In Insole's reading, Kant was a philosophical theist, 'not a Christian'.² Much of this debate also applies to Schleiermacher's theology and its legacy. The orthodoxy of Schleiermacher's theology has long been disputed and presented as the beginning of the end of Christian faith itself. Yet the tradition does continue, and the faith, in this specific form, has survived. A recent defense of this tradition has been offered by Brian A. Gerrish in his *Christian Faith: Dogmatics in Outline*. Gerrish works closely with Calvin but even closer with Schleiermacher in his articulation of the Christian faith. He argues that 'in dogmatics the baton not only changes hands but also may itself be changed – if real dogmatic theology is being done, not *uncritical* transmission' (p. x, emphasis his). Gerrish works up from an 'elemental faith' (p. 8) that is universal to a specific 'religious faith' (articulated in 'imagery and story', p. 10) and then finally to the 'Christian faith', a specific kind of trust in God as the 'Father of Jesus Christ' (p. 12), a 'filial trust' (p. 12), one grounded in the 'words and deeds of Jesus' (p. 12). As Gerrish points out, the Old Testament is viewed by Schleiermacher as belonging to another religion, a 'religion of law' (p. 25), not sharing the 'normative dignity or the inspiration of the New',³ and the 'self-proclamation of Christ' is the 'one spring from which all Christian doctrine is derived'.⁴ This self-proclamation gave rise to 'the faith and preaching of the first disciples' (p. 24), thus the New Testament reflects this, and can still give rise to this faith. In Gerrish's reading, according to Schleiermacher, explanations of 'Christian doctrine' are simply describing 'Christian experience' (p. 25). In this line of thought, Christian faith is essentially concerned with the 'redemption accomplished by Jesus' (p. 31), which presupposes the doctrine of creation and preservation. Gerrish's work is thus divided into two parts: creation (pp. 33–74) and redemption (pp. 75–288), the latter being the true subject matter of Christian faith, the 'properly Christian theme' (p. 31). In the conclusion, he addresses the Trinity and 'The End' (p. 307). Sin is understood as emerging from 'inborn egocentrism and the collective pressures of society' (p. 77). Following Schleiermacher, Gerrish sees Christ as the ideal of God-consciousness, God *in* Christ, and thus rejects that Jesus Christ was God (p. 158). The Redeemer is not

¹Christopher J. Insole, *Kant and the Divine: From Contemplation to the Moral Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 300.

²Insole, *Kant and the Divine*, p. 320. For a defense of Kant as a Christian thinker, see Stephen R. Palmquist, *Kant's Critical Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

³Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), p. 608; as cited in Gerrish, p. 25.

⁴Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, p. 92; as cited in Gerrish, p. 25.

the historical Jesus but 'the Christ of faith who is proclaimed in the church as the living Savior' (p. 160). Indeed, the 'picture of Christ' is the source of Christian faith, yet the '*confirmation* of faith' rests 'in the transmission of the picture in the corporate life of the Christian community' (p. 160). Reconciliation to God is about restoring an 'elemental trust' (p. 163). The doctrine of irresistible grace is qualified significantly, for an 'irreducible element of mystery will always remain' (p. 173) – we should 'exercise reserve' (p. 173). Against the old claims regarding the exclusivity of salvation, Gerrish argues that the Christian faith is one faith expression of the 'common faith of humanity' (p. 211) – the latter can be 'had' in other ways (p. 211). In Gerrish's assessment, both adults and children can be baptized, both positions being established from 'equally valid theologies' (pp. 273–4): the New Testament contains 'neither a command to baptize infants nor a prohibition of it' (p. 273). Virtue radiates to us from the historical Christ at the Lord's Supper through 'the historical community he established' (p. 287); the eating and drinking captures the 'mysterious' and 'vital' union of the believer with Christ (pp. 287–8). In Gerrish's reading, 'Christian faith recognizes what we might call 'the dual incarnation' of God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, both in the words and works of Jesus Christ and also in the community of the Spirit, which is the ecclesial body of Christ' (p. 305). Indeed, 'God *in* Christ is the Father' (p. 305). Gerrish encourages his readers not to give up hope too quickly on the survival of personal identity after death. Yet he argues that Christian hope is more than hope for the afterlife. We should remain 'frankly agnostic' about the afterlife (p. 316).

The most recent major contribution to liberal Protestant dogmatic theology in English is Douglas F. Ottati's new single-volume treatment of systematic theology. The work stems primarily from the tradition of liberal reformed Protestantism following Schleiermacher. It is also very similar to Gerrish on many points. Ottati lays out a vision of Christian thought with view to contemporary discourses of scientific research and in line with a historical–critical approach to the biblical sources. He outlines a new strand of theology articulated from a handful of key realms of religious thought, including Augustinianism (theology of divine sovereignty, sin, grace, and redemption), Protestantism (theology of grace, a new criticism of history and institutions, and a questioning of traditions with scripture), liberalism (critical scientific thought, historical criticism and consciousness, and social criticism and engagement), and theistic humanism (sensing the 'Creator-Judge-Redeemer stands in relationship to all things', p. 17). The work is broken into three sections, 'Method' (pp. 23–154), 'Creation' (pp. 155–332), and 'Redemption' (pp. 333–739). Following Schleiermacher and Gerrish, Ottati locates the doctrine of the Trinity at the end: 'Epilogue: The Sense the Trinity Makes' (pp. 741–9). At the outset of the volume, and similar to Schleiermacher and Gerrish, a list of 70 propositions is offered (pp. xiii–xx). Ottati discusses these throughout

his work. They help the student by providing orientation and an overall backbone to the theology. Ottati is critical of a 'problematic feature of Protestant piety' entailing the 'temptation to false certainty and intolerance' (p. 7). He develops his theology in a different direction, emphasizing religious affections. Religious people grasp something deeper, a 'referential element' (p. 38), in the same affections that all people experience (something similar to Gerrish's 'elemental faith'). The religious-emotional substratum of human life is also grasped in the feeling of dependence, gratitude, remorse, potentiality, limitation, sublimity, and assurance. Ottati argues that these sensibilities can be understood as pointing toward an 'encompassing mystery' or a 'further felt reality' (p. 43). We are compelled by this religious consciousness to understand our lives as pointing to 'Something More' (p. 43, Ottati's capitalization) – perhaps similar to Gerrish's 'religious faith'. The theology unfolds from here, for the interpretation of these affections is encouraged by 'communities of language, practice, and belief' (p. 46), which employ a symbolic, indeed 'mythopoeitic' (p. 48) interpretive framework. The 'event of Jesus Christ' formed the 'Christian community' (p. 70), for it 'casts up a pattern that is taken to illuminate God, the world, and ourselves.' (p. 71). The origin-laden and direction-laden language ('casts up ...') and the passive voice of the verb ('taken to ...') seem to have been carefully chosen at this juncture, and they fit perfectly into the system thus far. Ottati's 'pattern' language is somewhat similar to Gerrish's 'picture' language. Ottati argues that 'in Jesus Christ, we come to know the God of grace' (p. 387). It has to do with encountering 'Jesus as the Christ' (p. 387). He regards 'incarnation talk as one of a number of possible and also largely symbolic ways of articulating piety's apprehension that, in Jesus as the Christ, we know the God of grace' (p. 388). The death and resurrection of Christ is ethically decoded as moving people 'toward reconciliation' (p. 458); it is a specific 'pattern of the Christ event', working to 'empower and provoke a redemptive change' (p. 458). Thus, Easter is really not about 'the possible metaphysics of Jesus's resurrected body' (p. 495). The Lord's Supper and Baptism are given very brief remarks (pp. 539–42); the basic idea follows naturally in the system, for 'Christ is really spiritually or mystically present by the power of the Spirit' (p. 539s); indeed, 'the Christ' is present wherever 'two or three are gathered together in his name' (p. 540). Baptism, given one paragraph in the nearly 800-page systematics, is a 'visible sign and living symbol of entrance into the covenant of grace' (p. 542). Ottati does not specify the way baptism should be practiced. Yet he seems to make some statements to support the baptism of children, for 'the God of grace knows us before we know God. The God of grace always already stands in relation to all, and so always already counts all as God's own' (p. 542). He argues that through baptism, we are 'engrafted and accepted in the people of God'; Ottati specifies that people are baptized into the 'reality of true communion with God in community with others that extends

[...] from the first human pair forward' (p. 542). Much of Part Two on redemption is theological reflection on themes that tend to shift to ethical thought. The Christian confession of resurrection and eternal life is articulated in language of hope, similar to Gerrish: 'whatever its eventual shape or form, and whether or not it entails our personal survival, the relationship with God neither falters nor fails' (pp. 733–4). The doctrine of divine love and grace is universalized: 'To be is to be in relationship with the God who always already stands in relationship to all, and it is good to be because the God of grace is inseparable from creaturely existence' (p. 739). On the Trinity, Ottati argues that 'Jesus as the Christ [...] embodies and communicates [...] the [...] reality of [...] God [...]' (p. 748). He remains 'agnostic about the possibility of distinctions within the Godhead' (p. 749). Ottati prefers not the threefold being, but the 'threefold apprehension' (p. 748).

Gerrish and Ottati are creative interpreters, and they are generous with the classical tradition in their innovative works. There is much to learn about the Christian faith from these works, and every reader will gain new insights. Of course, one must be prepared to accept the ultimate claims resulting from this approach. On the doctrinal issues, Gerrish and Ottati's theologies do not affirm the Christological theologies of the Nicene Creed nor the main Protestant confessional positions of the sixteenth century *in the original senses*. Many of them are indeed affirmed *in new interpretations*. That is not to say that the sources, terms, and figures are not being discussed and employed. There is, in fact, a deep conversation with the tradition taking place in this theology, yet the result is not the same 'baton' (to use Gerrish's term). Like Kant and Schleiermacher, they are uncovering and affirming something more fundamental in the teachings. A new form of the Christian faith is being brought to expression in these theologies. There is no way around the old conflict about this theology; it will always generate different impressions. For some, indeed most Christians today, this new form of the faith (having its true point of departure, at least in terms of the contemporary reception, in Schleiermacher's *Speeches* from 1799, and thus in the underlying mix of Spinoza's theology and a specific element of experiential Pietism) will feel somewhat untethered from the tradition; for others, however, the freedom of thought will be welcomed with a warm embrace, and felt to be a powerful and deeply attractive expression of the sense of the infinite which is, of course, truer in its immediacy than any historical doctrinal statement can ever be. Finally, for a very small group of theologians, who see truth in both moments, it will somehow be both.

Liberal Protestant theology thus lives on today, and its reception is just as divided as it once was in the nineteenth century. In terms of its legacy, however, a shift has occurred. The liberal Protestant communities that do the 'transmission' work (to use Gerrish's term) are in major trends of decline. In 1900 in Berlin, Harnack gave his lectures on the essence of

Christianity to around 600 students. In the 1950s at Union, Tillich's lecture halls were overcrowded with Columbia students. What does the future hold for liberal Protestant theology? Ironically, the broad tradition of liberal Protestant theology may actually be strongly represented in the future in various forms of generous orthodoxy (to use Hans Frei's term). This approach seeks to understand and affirm both moments, the liberal and the orthodox, at the same time. After all, liberal Protestant theology never really wanted to get rid of the language and concepts from the orthodox tradition; it just wanted to revise their meanings, translate them into a new sense of the religious. This is the orthodox moment in the liberal enlightenment tradition, and if it remains connected at a synthetic level (which it usually does not), it can keep a fermentation process alive in the old orthodoxy from which it emerged.