

BOOK REVIEW

Matthew L. Becker, *Fundamental Theology. A Protestant Perspective*. Second Edition. London: T&T Clark, Bloomsbury Publishing Pic. 2024. 735 pages.

doi:[10.1017/S1740355324000263](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000263)

This comprehensive description of Christian theology has the character of an encyclopaedia. It is such a rich text with a claim to present extensive knowledge for undergraduate students of theology in universities and seminaries in the USA.

The title 'Fundamental Theology' reminds mainly of Roman Catholic fundamental theology, often close to the teaching of the Vatican. However, very early on, the author asserts that Protestant fundamental theology includes different views that during history have been criticized. 'Lutherans can never absolutize their own perspectives'. This is a sympathetic view. The author is a university professor of theology at Valparaiso University, USA, as well as an ordained Lutheran minister within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It should at once be said that the author has an ambition to present the subject in an extensive way with basic historical facts from different Christian traditions but also from non-Christian viewpoints as well as philosophical perspectives, including atheistic horizons. In this overwhelmingly substantial book with ecumenical views from a number of different traditions, the emphasis is mainly historic. The controversial environmental and climate-oriented theology of our days is difficult to be found.

In presenting questions regarding interpretation of the Scriptures, the author goes into the matter in considerable detail and gives a pedagogical exposition of hermeneutical views. This chapter is certainly decisive for the whole text and gives reflections that resist superficial biblical expositions. With a conscious hermeneutical insight, it is possible to reach new theological understandings, but without such insight, theology can easily be used for purposes that fundamentally deny the main biblical message. The final part of the book discusses theology as a university discipline. Here, we meet a proposal to divide Christian theology into three parts, so-called fundamental theology, historical theology and practical theology. Fundamental theology here comes close to what traditionally are called theological prolegomena. The hermeneutical platform is again emphasized. Fundamental theology has all the time to put 'Christian faith and practice into a position of being questioned'. All kinds of dogmatism should be called into question.

Historical theology utilizes historical-critical methods as all other academic historians do. Within historical theology, we find biblical theology, doctrinal

theology, the history of Christian theology and the history of Christianity. It is here asserted that 'the history of Christianity' is a better description than the – more usual – 'church history'. The idea is that much in this history involves more than the Church. He argues here for a broadening of perspectives towards not only one Church but also towards Christian personalities active outside the Church or decisive factors outside the church. This position may look interesting, opening new doors, but it could easily be argued that the Church is always present where Christian women and men are living; the Church is certainly not only one particular organization. The surrounding society plays an important role in all historical research concerning Christian life as well as the Church. It is, in other words, not really convincing to change the traditional concept 'Church history' to 'history of Christianity'. Moreover, however, one could be criticized for placing theological ethics inside practical theology. In this way, doctrinal theology is separated from the theological ethics. In my view, these fields belong together as closely as possible: there is no theory without a corresponding practice and vice versa. Doctrine and ethics are often separated as different fields but normally within a common framework as, for instance, systematic theology. With this latter question, I have already started to give critical perspectives.

First of all, I want to emphasize the hermeneutical viewpoints throughout the text. This is a great achievement that gives this theological book a profile of our time, protecting it from superficiality. When this is said, it also has to be mentioned that the author sometimes leaves the hermeneutical view and simply states that 'divine revelation is the principal source of all Christian theological knowledge' or 'the overall theological task of seeking divine truth'. In both cases, a hermeneutical view would tell us that it is human beings who give witness to what they have found to be divine truth or what they seek. The theological commission is hermeneutically to analyse what human beings have found to be divine. Theology as such cannot present any evidence for the statement that a text contains 'a divine revelation or a divine truth'.

Finally, it is unfortunate to have to note that the author has no knowledge of Scandinavian Creation Theology. It is a profiled Lutheran school that has published substantial contributions during many years. When reading the second part of this book with the title 'The Subject of Christian Theology', we will meet at the final 'key themes in special revelation', among which creation is mentioned. Here also is to be found theology of the Holy Spirit, trinitarian theology, the Church and eschatology. I would say a more Lutheran perspective would be to start with creation before saying anything about 'Jesus as the Center of Salvation History'. But it is of course not only a more Lutheran way; it is a perspective clearly found in the biblical texts as well as in early Christian reflections and in the early Church. Luther has not invented this, although he is a profound advocate for this theological perspective. When starting with creation theology, it also becomes more or less necessary to take into consideration the present situation with regard to the climate crisis, environmental perspectives and the wholistic view of nature. This would have given this book a strength and a challenging content directly engaging the dilemma of our time.

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