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Life in the Spirit. Systematic Theology: Volume Three

Thomas C. Oden

San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1992

xii + 548 pp. \$40.00 \$30.00 U.S.

With *Life in the Spirit* Thomas Oden brings to completion his three-volume *Systematic Theology*. As he indicates in his preface, he has consciously held to his initial commitments "to make no new contribution to theology", "to resist the temptation to quote modern writers less schooled in the whole counsel of God than the best ancient classic exegetes", and "to seek quite simply to express the one mind of the believing church that has been ever attentive to that apostolic teaching to which consent has been given by christian believers everywhere, always, and by all" (vii). In general, and in many particulars, Oden has been as good as his word. He has eschewed innovation and has clung powerfully and, not infrequently, eloquently to the mind of the church as expressed in the great tradition of the fathers, medieval doctors, Reformers, and Protestant orthodox theologians. And, at this level, Oden's *Systematic Theology* remains one of the best synopses of traditional theology presently available.

The volume is divided into four parts and covers the latter part of theological system in a traditional survey of the doctrines of the Holy Spirit, salvation (i.e., the *ordo salutis*), the church, and human destiny. The credal model of Oden's work is perhaps more evident here than in the preceding volumes in the sections on the Spirit, the marks of the church, the final resurrection, and the communion of saints. Of interest to Protestants is the clear choice made by Oden for a doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone, with good works as the necessary fruit of faith but not as a cause of salvation. Oden does not, however, draw a distinction between the Reformation and the medieval tradition on this point and he appears to assume that the writers of the patristic era can uniformly be enlisted on the Protestant side, contrary to the collected wisdom of historians of doctrine like Harnack, Seeberg, and Pelikan.

This somewhat harmonistic approach to a distinctively Pauline and Protestant doctrine points to a methodological problem in Oden's work. While he is certainly correct that this great tradition speaks with a broad consensus on the chief matters of the faith as echoed in the ecumenical creeds and to a certain extent still in the confessions and catechisms of the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and major Protestant denominations, a problem arises when Oden moves beyond the fundamental *de fide* articles to the level of detail—and diversity—found in systematic theology, even within individual denominations. There is, certainly, no solid methodological ground for citing Thomas Aquinas and II Clement as congenial bedfellows with Calvin and Chemnitz in the discussion of justification or for an attempt to define the "inclusiveness of the final event" (i.e., the resurrection

of both the just and the unjust) by offering, without historical or theological analysis, a catena of references and quotations like the following: Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, XVI; John 5:28, 29; Matthew 25:32; Revelation 20:12; J.H. Heidegger, *Medulla theologiae*, XXVIII; and Aphrahat, *Demonstrations, Of Death*. Or, similarly, in asking what precisely is raised in the final resurrection, to cite Romans 6:19; 12:1; 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20; 9:27; Justin Martyr, *On the Resurrection*, VII; Ignatius, *Smyrneans*, 2-9; the *Formula of Concord*; and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, III.79. In neither of these presentations is the context of the passage noted, nor are exegetical difficulties, nor, indeed, are the substantial differences between the various theologies noted: the reader is given the impression that simple transitions can be made between thinkers who are chronologically and theologically diverse.

It must also be asked whether the best and most fruitful way of holding to the tradition is "to make no new contribution to theology" and to cite primarily the ancient writers rather than modern ones—primarily on the ground that "modernity" is "corrupt" (vii). When Athanasius cited Arius and Augustine cited Pelagius, Celestius, and Julian, they were citing contemporary theological opinion. Indeed, it is the fundamental characteristic of the great tradition that, in its defence of received truth, it is unabashedly contemporary in its language and in its citation of authors. And on a positive, as distinct from polemical, note, it is the fundamental characteristic of the most significant theological works in the great tradition, like Athanasius' *Incarnation of the Word*, Augustine's *On the Trinity*, Aquinas' *Summa theologiae*, and Luther's *Freedom of a Christian*, that they said something new at the same time that they affirmed the great old truths of the faith. It is precisely the element of newness in the midst of respect for the tradition that draws the tradition forward as a living witness. What is all too frequently lacking in Oden's system are Oden's own thoughts on the issues, problems, divergences, and debates (yes, there *are* problems, divergences, and debates) in the tradition. The tradition remains, after Scripture, the great source of Christian teaching, but unless it is analyzed in the language of the present and in dialogue with the problems of the present, its insights may remain locked in the past.

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