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Book Review

Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom

Paul R. Hinlicky

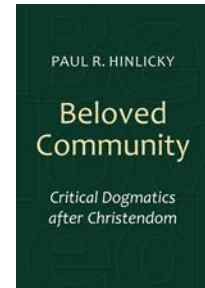
Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015

The subtitle of this work signals the formidable task the author has assigned himself, while the title proper indicates what Hinlicky takes to be the arche and telos of creation, the Beloved Community of the Holy Trinity, choosing in divine time to make space in God for creation that finds its purpose in being drawn into this Beloved Community.

The book takes a somewhat unorthodox tack in service of orthodoxy. After the requisite treatment of prolegomena, the move for this systematic theology is from Pneumatology, to Christology, to Patrology and finishing with Doxology. Hinlicky, Tise Professor of Lutheran Studies at Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia contends that this order references how we actually come to know God in God's dealings ad extra: "in the Spirit we are conformed to Christ in whom we are given to the Father" (880). This is an author for whom "the purpose of theology is to know God" (xix), and to know God properly is to know the unity of God as "essential harmony rather than simple self-identity" (15).

In the prolegomena we are introduced to "critical dogmatics" that is in service of the intent of the book. It is "dogmatic," not in the sense that it is ossified but in that it works from under the discipline inaugurated by the Reign of Christ already begun, while it is "critical" insofar as it waits upon promise yet to be fulfilled (34). It does this by way of a methodology that de-literalizes and de-codes data from Holy Scripture. Unlike, Bultmann, whose program of demythologization imagined a trans-culture kernel that was wrapped in disposable mythic husks, Hinlicky sees the narrative advancing the topics of theology using similes and metaphors in an indispensable fashion that have clear references. While tropes, and such, are not to be taken literally they cannot be dispensed of without further ado.

Hinlicky's section on Pneumatology is fundamental to understanding his work. Throughout the text, readers will encounter his carefully articulated conviction that the work of the Spirit is to unify the sign and the thing signified. This motif is given extensive treatment, from the easily imagined examples of the sacraments to the more creative and interesting examples of the human as sign of the divine intention of the resurrection of the dead (889). This role of the Spirit is drawn upon extensively throughout the text and is well served by an early and clear articulation of this primary identification of the work of the Spirit. Hinlicky treats the topic of Holy Baptism in this section and makes the interesting observation that the baptism, or not, of infants is a matter of pastoral freedom and discernment (256). This move, in a way, is a significant signal of Hinlicky's discontent with the state of Christianity in the Euro-American church, which has caved into trends and such that require a significant reconfiguration of both pastoral practice and systematic theology. Concerning the latter, he is especially concerned with the way in which modern Trinitarian theology too often recapitulates the post-Kantian obsession of the self which is mapped onto God (via Hegel) to the end that simplicity rather than harmony frames our ways of seeing God. The result is that when thinking the Trinity, the Western church regularly imagines a "nature" behind the persons that finally constitutes either a kind of fourth, or the undoing of



Trinitarian thought in toto. To this end, Hinlicky following Robert Jenson, understands the Trinitarian relations describe a God without reserve (125); that is that there is not some Deus nudus behind the God whom we know as triune. This God is Creator, and it is in the Pneumatology that Hinlicky underscores the role of the Spirit as “Spiritus Creator” recalling the work of Reginald Prenter’s investigation of this in Luther’s work. Attention to creation, then, is significant for Hinlicky but interestingly front-ended in his system via an inversion of order. Gustaf Wingren, another important Scandinavian theologian from the mid-twentieth century (and so a contemporary of Prenter), underscored the need for theology to begin with creation by virtue of its prominence in the first article of the creeds. Hinlicky, then, in a way gives a nod to this Scandinavian creation theology yet in an obverse fashion. More on this might have benefited this section.

Hinlicky’s Christology is the locus where the Eucharist is treated, since he sees this as proper to Christology, as is baptism to Pneumatology and prayer to Patrology. He sees in the Eucharistic reference to “my body” a promise that only a human can give and that only God can make (518). The Spirit, then, is the one who rest upon the Word and unifies this promised sign and its referents, and so reminds us that we cannot think Word apart from Spirit and vice versa. This Word made bread, then, references the Word made flesh, who as Messiah names that which was expected (406). Jesus of Nazareth, then, is the content of the promise, which Hinlicky describes as fit for doctrinal formulation, which “is timely, not timeless; it is contextually apt, not above and beyond the fray” (439). This is a most promising articulation, and more on this follows in my concluding comments below.

In discussing Patrology, two themes come to the fore for this reviewer. First, the Father of the Trinity named as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the God of Holy Scriptures. This was a point iterated by Karl Rahner in his magisterial treatment of the Trinity, and is a fundamental point for Hinlicky in ensuring that some fourth not be found alongside of, or behind the three. Second, this Father is supremely identified as God surpassing God (xxvii), whose character is demonstrated in sending the Son, born of the Virgin Mary (deliteralized and decoded as an icon of God in grace for redemption of humanity and underscoring the Jewishness of Jesus, 411, 415) to be sin (638). God the Father, too, engages in kenosis in creation (766). Moreover, the Father is considered the ultimate audience of theology, usurping modern preoccupations with any number of publics (613). All the same, Hinlicky’s critical dogmatics, as noted above, recognizes the importance of context, yet renders it a proximate audience to the primary audience of the Father. This point warrants some observations.

In the section entitled “Contextual Considerations,” Hinlicky primarily addresses the well-rehearsed critique of the Kantian captivity of method, etc. and helpful (and brilliantly) advances insights from Leibnitz as important corrections. It is beyond the scope of this review to comment on these, but it is this reviewers duty to call attention to his elsewhere attention to items such as slavery and the trail of tears, albeit in passing (684). Certainly the church’s implications in these and other colonial practices have had as disastrous effect on the Christian imaginary as Kant-run-amok. This is not to gainsay the creative, and important interpretive work that Hinlicky does in response to the problematics of the philosophical captivity of certain quarters of the church. I can only imagine how a mind as creative as his might enliven a theology of the cross by deliteralizing and decoding it in light (or perhaps the shadow) of the practice of lynching (in taking up James Cone’s challenge) – to cite but one example. A more fulsome treatment of feminist critiques of patriarchal language in

naming the Trinity “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” would also have been welcomed, with assessment of alternatives on offer. Many readers might also be interested in a deeper engagement of other religions in a work such as this.

Despite these critiques, I wholeheartedly endorse this book. Hinlicky has an impressive command of the Euro-American Christian tradition. His is an astute mind, able to draw from a broad range of thinkers across the traditions, with an especially forceful command of Lutheran thought. Here is an author able to command the thought of both Tillich and Barth (and their heirs and contemporaries) with erudite sympathy and criticism. Readers will have the sense that they have in their hands the marshalling of a life’s worth of work of textual analysis. They will delight in his rich textual analysis of biblical texts. But above all, the work offers readers the invitation to take up the task of critical dogmatics after Christendom.

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