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Review of "Thinking with the Church: Essays in Historical Theology"

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Thinking with the Church: Essays in Historical Theology

By B. A. Gerrish

Eerdmans, Battle Creek, 2010. xxvi + 287pp. \$25.00. ISBN 978-0-8028-6452-9.

In his most recent collection of essays (three of which are published here for the first time), B. A. Gerrish continues to set the standard for the discipline of historical theology. Combining the historian's attention to context and development with the systematician's concern for the appropriateness and relevance of Christian claims in the present, Gerrish offers twelve essays on such diverse figures as J. G. Fichte, Charles Hodge, and, of course, John Calvin and Friedrich Schleiermacher. The result is the latest in an impressive list of publications urging theologians and pastors to do the necessary and highly rewarding work of thinking critically with the church.

In a particularly illuminating reference to Calvin's understanding of tradition, Gerrish summarizes the thesis of the entire collection in a way that is particularly instructive for anyone wishing to delve into the riches of the Christian tradition in order to speak meaningfully and faithfully to their own time and place. Quoting Calvin, "[O]ur constant endeavor, day and night, is to *form* in the manner we think will be best whatever is faithfully *handed on* by us." And perhaps even more illuminating is a reference immediately following this quotation: "[A]s [Calvin] sometimes puts it less technically, there is a difference between a disciple and an ape" (p. 122).

As Gerrish demonstrates in each of his essays, the work of historical theology is more than simply descriptive; it is itself *constructive* of the tradition it hands over. Each of the essays assumes this task more or less explicitly by surveying a broad terrain of German- and English-speaking theology on such themes as revelation, faith and morals, the Calvinist tradition, atonement, and the Eucharist and the grace of Christ. Readers familiar with Gerrish's work will not be surprised to find heavy doses of Calvin and Schleiermacher, but many will also enjoy several essays on the Princeton theologian Charles Hodge and his engagement with the Calvinist tradition in a nineteenth-century American context. Each of the essays offers fresh new insights to the careful reader, whether theologians, historians, pastors, or seminarians.

Returning to the significance of the title chosen for this collection, Gerrish invites his readers to engage these diverse figures in the immensely rewarding work of thinking critically with the church, both to appropriate their best insights *and* to carry on in our own time and place their task (and ours) of faith seeking understanding, not as apes but as disciples.

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