

Book Reviews/Revue des Livres/ Buchbesprechungen

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Assurance of Faith

Joel R. Beeke

New York: Peter Lang, 1991, 16 + 518 pp., \$42.95

SUMMARY

This book reviews the doctrine of assurance from the early Church to Puritanism and the Dutch Second Reformation (Part I). Part II is devoted to the doctrine in Puritanism, and Part III compares English Puritanism with the Dutch Second Reformation. The book laments the modern Church's neglect of the doctrine. The reviewer broadly endorses the book's thesis, arguing that the practical and pastoral concern for assurance would 'warm up' contemporary discussion of the Trinity.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans la première partie de son livre, J. Beeke retrace l'évolution de la doctrine de l'assurance de la foi, depuis l'Église primitive jusqu'au temps des puritains et de la Seconde Réforme hollandaise. Il consacre la deuxième partie à l'étude de la doctrine chez les puritains, et la troisième à une comparaison du puritanisme anglaise et de la Seconde Réforme hollandaise. Il déplore que l'Église d'aujourd'hui néglige cette doctrine. A. P. F. Sell approuve, en général, la thèse du livre, et suggère qu'un intérêt pastoral et pratique pour la doctrine de l'assurance de la foi pourrait introduire plus de 'chaleur' dans les débats actuels sur la Trinité.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieses Buch untersucht die Lehre von der Glaubensgewißheit: im ersten Teil die Entwicklung dieser Lehre von der Urgemeinde bis zum Puritanismus und der zweiten niederländischen Reformation, im zweiten Teil widmet es sich ausschließlich dieser Lehre im Puritanismus und vergleicht im dritten Teil den englischen Puritanismus mit der zweiten niederländischen Reformation. Der Autor bemängelt die Vernachlässigung dieser Lehre seitens der heutigen Kirche. Der Rezensent befürwortet weitgehend die These des Buches, daß eine praktisch-seelsorgerliche Beschäftigung mit der Glaubensgewißheit die gegenwärtige Diskussion um die Trinität mit Leben erfüllen könnte.

With this substantial and welcome volume Joel R. Beeke makes a significant and diverse contribution to the history and import of a currently neglected doctrine. The diversity is revealed in his elucidation of the development of the doctrine of assurance through the centuries to the Dutch Second Reformation; his holding together of the British and Dutch aspects of the matter; his engaging in the current 'Calvinism *versus* Calvin' debate; and his pleading for a faith which is biblically-grounded, reasoned, experimental and practical. That he can hold all of these concerns together and leave us with a volume which is a unity is testimony to his considerable organizational skill.

The author's thesis is that 'Calvinism's wranglings with assurance were *quantitatively* beyond, but not *qualitatively* contradictory to, that of Calvin'. In Part One, 'Assurance prior to the Westminster Assembly', he outlines the (relatively scanty) treatment of the doctrine of assurance in the early and medieval Church, proceeding thence to 'The Reformation from Luther to Bullinger', 'Reformed developments in Calvin and Beza', and 'The fathers of English Puritanism and the Dutch Second Reformation'. Dr. Beeke's route may very roughly be charted by this following collage of quotations:

'[F]or Calvin assuring faith compels an indissoluble tie between *saving knowledge*, the *Scriptures*, *Jesus Christ*, *God's promises*, the *work of the Holy Spirit*, and *election* . . . Calvin clearly allows for varying degrees of faith and assurance . . . For Beza and Calvin, the critical point is *faith in Christ*. There are no *essential* differences between their views on assurance, though their *emphases* and *methods* vary considerably – no doubt in some measure due to their being in different milieus . . . Teelinck was not simply a duplicate of Perkins. In some senses he "out-puritaned" the "father" of Puritanism by his intense emphasis on godly living, the fruits of love, the marks of grace, and the primacy of the will'.

The ground laid, the author turns in Part Two to 'Assurance from the Westminster Assembly to Alexander Comrie'. He discusses 'English Puritanism and the Westminster Confession, chapter 18', 'John Owen', and 'Alexander Comrie'. He finds that 'Though the Puritans deny works-righteousness on the one hand against the "legalist", they also reject the notion of assurance

which rests on mere doctrine against the cold "professor" of Christianity . . . The organic yet distinct relationship between . . . saving faith in its essence and developed assurance, was critical for the Puritans from a pastoral perspective . . . In Part Three, 'Comparison of English Puritanism and the Dutch Second Reformation', Thomas Goodwin and Owen, and Goodwin and Comrie are compared, Goodwin being revealed as the one in whom, above all, English and Dutch teaching on assurance was synthesized. In his 'Conclusion' Dr. Beeke rehearses the difference of emphasis between English and Dutch Calvinism – for example, the English Puritans emphasised the marks of grace, the Dutch of the New Reformation the steps of grace – and laments the fact that today's Church is 'for the most part, scarcely aware that it is crippled with a comparative absence of strong, full assurance'. There follows a helpful appendix on 'The Dutch Second Reformation'.

This detailed, clearly organised work reads well (though sometimes the small words let the author down – as in the sentence just quoted; and he is too fond of italics and of the adjective, 'renowned'). The notes are a mine of information, and whole courses of lectures could be developed out of some of them. Where necessary Dr. Beeke offers grounds for dissenting from such older scholars as William Cunningham and John McLeod, and from such of his contemporaries as W. Niesel and R. T. Kendall. There are occasional slips, as when in the Bibliography my former esteemed colleague Lawrence Proctor is rebaptised; and the omission of the late Robert Paul's magisterial work on the Westminster Assembly is surprising.

Close analysis of the author's case cannot be entered upon here, though it is possible to endorse his main argument. Three general remarks may, however, be made. First, Dr. Beeke writes, 'Perkins knew that his hearers would be led to fundamental questions such as these: "Am I one of the elect . . . How may I be sure that I possess true faith . . . ?"'. One wonders how many ministers of today face a barrage of such questions. Ought we to be worried if they do not? For the Puritans, 'God's absolute promises in election and covenant are solid pillars for increasing weak faith'. If they are right, is it not disturbing that predestination – even as good news – is conspicuous by its absence from many statements and affirmations of faith published by Reformed churches over the past thirty years?

Secondly, there is a welcome recovery of the doctrine of the Trinity in current systematic theology. An intensely practical and pastoral concern for assurance as here discussed – and trinitarian references abound – would 'warm up'

trinitarian discussion and act as a safeguard against the Trinity's becoming simply a systematician's presupposition, or a counter to be played. These writings also implicitly question the wedge which is sometimes driven between the so-called 'academic' and the so-called 'practical' in theological education. At the same time, when Dr. Beeke throws down the gauntlet thus: 'saving faith is essential to the true study of Christian theology. When theology is properly undertaken, even its scientific aspect cannot be divorced from faith', one hesitates over the word 'study'. However it may be with theological construction, I, for one, wish theology to be studied and criticised by believers and unbelievers alike. Accordingly, we must take care that the terms 'true' and 'properly' are not used in such a way as to legitimate a patronising, falsely proud new gnosticism in the academy along the lines, 'Lack of comprehension, or of assent, is only what you would expect from the uninitiated/unsaved/unsound'!

Thirdly, we are informed that Dr. Beeke is 'pastor of a very large congregation in Grand Rapids, Michigan'. There is reassurance (save the pun!) in the fact that while some in comparable positions have, willingly or not, come more and more to resemble directors of corporations, Dr. Beeke continues to exalt the vocation of director of souls.

Alan P. F. Sell
Aberystwyth, Wales

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0960–2720

Rethinking Genesis

D. A. Garrett

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SUMMARY

The author rejects the documentary hypothesis, but finds literary sources within Genesis, and proposes in particular that Genesis conforms to a pattern of prologue-threat-resolution found in the Atrahasis epic, and which he calls the 'ancestor epic'. The reviewer thinks the author has not demonstrated sufficient literary parallels to be convincing, and further that he is speculative in his reconstruction of sources underlying Genesis.

RÉSUMÉ

D. A. Garrett rejette l'hypothèse documentaire classique, mais il croit retrouver les sources littéraires de la Genèse à l'aide de la critique des formes. Il