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Everyone's a Theologian: An Introduction to Systematic Theology (Book Review)

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But the stories that changed the hearts and souls and minds of the vets who tell them can be manipulated or altered, reshaped for listeners simply because they do hold such monstrous power. Tell them right and they can get you laid, as several of Klay's vets come to learn. But those storytellers also learn that exploring with war experiences is its own minefield because manipulation risks discrediting both the stories and, they come to understand, the storytellers, which is to say, themselves.

What distinguishes Phil Klay's *Redeployment* from Tim O'Brien's famous 1990 Vietnam novel *The Things They Carried* has little to do with narrative power. Phil Klay had to have known and read O'Brien; O'Brien's influence is everywhere. Some of Klay's stories, given a few deft time-and-place edits, would fit snugly within the covers of *The Things They Carried*.

But *Redeployment* does something else: it studies war stories and their varied effects even while it tells them, which means it tells stories about telling stories; a hail of bullets becomes a hall of mirrors and, sadly enough, yet another form of PTSD. Klay's storytellers are haunted not only by what happened but also by how they try to explain and detail what happened.

Redeployment creates its own echo chamber, and the effect is stunning. Phil Klay walked away from the 2014 National Book Awards with the top prize, an award that is, to me, completely understandable.

Like *The Things They Carried*, *Redeployment* is not just a book you read, but a book you experience.

Phil Klay was there in Iraq, a Marine, and it's evident throughout. Consider:

When I got to the window and handed in my rifle, though, it brought me up short. That was the first time I'd been separated from it in months. I didn't know where to rest my hands. First I put them in my pockets, then I took them out and crossed my arms, and then I just let them hang, useless, at my sides.

It may well be possible for someone who wasn't there to imagine that unique emptiness, but such sharp perception creates authority that's totally convincing.

Redeployment takes us, time after time, into the equation all of us experience when we are suddenly forced to grow up, and it does it with war, something none of us really want to experience.

That Phil Klay walked off with the National Book Award is absolutely great because his *Redeployment* is, quite frankly, a great book. The stories his storytellers spin—and what they think about and feel while spinning them—creates a hall of mirrors that's as fascinating as it is horrifying.

This isn't a book for the beach. There are plenty of those.

Redeployment's power is that it is, without a doubt, deadly serious, as is war itself.

Sproul, R.C. *Everyone's a Theologian: An Introduction to Systematic Theology*. Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust. A Division of Ligonier Ministries, 2014. 357pp., ISBN-13:978-1-56769-365-2. Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Professor Emeritus, Political Studies and Public Affairs, University of Illinois Springfield.

Recently, I mulled over the bookstore offerings of Christian books. Finding a systematic theology of interest, I realized the paucity of such books in my study. Of Christian books, yes, I have quite a number and variety. My commentaries take up significant space. There are books by Calvin and about Calvin. I have Strong's *Concordance* and some biblical archaeology reference works. There are topical books by Plantinga, Schaap, Smedes, Van Til, Wolters, Wolterstorff, and many more. But my only systematic theology is Louis Berkhof's *Summary of Christian Doctrine*, his 1938 simplified version of his 1932 masterwork *Systematic Theology*. I recognized my lack and acquired R.C. Sproul's *Everyone's a Theologian*.

I am delighted with my purchase. After giving it a full reading, I compared it to Berkhof's *Summary*. The topics, organization, and coverage of the two

books are remarkably alike, although Sproul's work is half again as long as Berkhof's *Summary*. Sproul's work is divided into eight major sections, beginning with "What is Theology?" and concluding with about 40 engaging pages on eschatology.

Berkhof has, of course, provided readers with a welcome Reformed standard—an orderly, coherent exposition of the essential doctrines by which we begin to comprehend God and His way of salvation for humankind. Brief though it is, one can quickly explore its themes and scrutinize the biblical evidence underlying them. Despite nearly fourscore years since its publication, it remains a treasury of carefully measured theological analysis.

But Sproul's work does not suffer by comparison. I should note that Sproul's peers are mostly a Presbyterian lot. His degrees are from Westminster

College, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and the Free University of Amsterdam. He chairs Ligonier Ministries, and he is co-pastor of St. Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Florida. Mature in faith and practice, his publications include 90 books and numerous articles. His credits in preaching and lecturing are many and much praised.

Sproul's book is aptly subtitled an *Introduction to Systematic Theology*. It is not aimed to impress leading erudite theological scholars. It does not stake out new theological ground with arcane arguments or speculative interpretations. Sproul's strength comes from a wide and deep reading of philosophers and theologians, both ancient and modern. He, of course, discusses Calvin, Luther, Augustine, Edwards, and Warfield, among others. But other authors that Sproul grapples with are more surprising, including Bultmann, Camus, Locke, Nietzsche, and Bertrand Russell. Sproul is grounded by his long personal experience as an expository preacher and teacher. He brings well-honed skills to bear upon the task of explaining the whole counsel of God to spiritually hungry lay persons and students in language, and he uses images that they can comprehend and make their own.

Initially, I was not enamored of Sproul's main title for this work: *Everyone's a Theologian*. However, I take as his meaning that everyone necessarily has some conception, however disorganized or incomplete, about the reality or unreality of God. Perhaps persons who reflect on and become disturbed by the murkiness of their mental images of God will be drawn to this book for a better vision. Sproul does more than simply explain. He invites faith in the grounds for God's way of redemption. That is a good thing.

That leads me to a suggestion about how to use this book as more than a theological reference work. Each of its eight parts is subdivided into seven or more chapters. Quite consistently, the chapters span four to five pages of text. These well-crafted expositions of biblical truth lend themselves to be read day by day as helpful meditations. They will nicely complement prayer time, whether in the early morning, along with a meal, or near bedtime. The chapters not only stand alone, but they readably provide an accumulating understanding of God's sovereign plan for His church, as well as for each of us individually. It is a culminating joy to come to the end of Sproul's story, with "heaven and earth made new."

To whet the reader's taste for Sproul's treatment of theology, allow me to share some nuggets from his rendition. About general revelation, Sproul cites

Calvin's phrase "sense of the divine," and then he offers his own elaboration: "It is an awareness of God that He has planted in man's soul, and this awareness is manifested in our conscience and in our knowledge of God's law. . . . God's eternal power and deity are made clear to the whole world through general revelation. Our sinful suppression of that revelation does not erase the knowledge of God that He has given us through nature and our hearts" (19).

What then of special revelation? Sproul says that "[t]hrough both the prophets of the Old Testament and the Apostles of the New Testament, we have been given a written record of special revelation. It has come to us by the agents of Christ, his authorized agents of revelation. Jesus left no manuscript bearing His signature; He was the author of no book. Everything we know about Him is contained in the New Testament record that has come to us through the work of His Apostles. They are his emissaries, who were given His authority to speak on his behalf" (23). Sproul adds that "there is no serious dispute among theologians about Jesus' view of the Bible. Scholars and theologians of all backgrounds, liberals and conservatives alike, agree that the historical Jesus of Nazareth believed and taught the high, exalted view of Scripture that was common to first-second-century Judaism, namely that the Bible is nothing less than the inspired word of God" (32).

Here is Sproul on God's providence: "When Jesus said, 'Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on' (Matt. 6:25), He was not advocating a careless approach to life. He was talking about anxiety. We are not to be frightened; we are to put our trust in the God who will meet our needs. At the same time, God entrusts a responsibility to heads of households to be provident, that is, to consider tomorrow and to make sure there is food and clothing for the family" (78). He writes, "That is the great mystery of providence – a concurrence. In the mystery of divine providence, God works His will even through our intentional decisions. When Joseph said, 'you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good,' he meant that although his brothers had intended something evil, the good providence of God stood above that, and God was working through their wickedness for the good of the people.... That is the great comfort of the doctrine of providence, that God stands over all things and works them together for the good of his people (Rom. 8:28), and He is the ultimate source of our comfort" (82-83).

Sproul points out that the covenant of grace

is about more than redemption: “We tend to think of redemption as the regaining of the paradise that Adam and Eve lost, but that is a misunderstanding. Redemption is not merely a restoration to where Adam and Eve were before they fell, but a promotion to the state that they would have achieved had they been successful in obeying the covenant terms” (123).

On Christ’s death, Sproul says that “[i]t was God the Father who sent His Son into the world to pay the price for our moral guilt. The Father said to the Son, ‘I will accept your payment on behalf of these guilty people who cannot pay their debt.’ God does not negotiate His justice. He does not sacrifice His righteousness or discard His integrity. He said, in essence, ‘I am going to make sure that sin is punished.’ That is the justness of the cross. The mercy of the cross is seen in that God accepted the payment by a substitute” (158-159).

Regarding election, Christ “died for the whole of the elect, which includes people from every part of the world. However, he did not die for the non-elect. He did not die for Satan. He did not die for those who, in God’s eternal decree, are not the special objects of his favor election. Holding to the *L* in TULIP is the litmus test of whether one really believes what the other letters represent.... The cross has always been part of the eternal plan of God’s redemption, and its design is intended for the elect. It is comforting to know that Christ did not die in vain, and that His accomplished redemption will certainly be applied to those whom He purposed to save” (168-169).

What about the earthly church? “It is worth noting that the church is the only institution in the history of the world to whom God has given an absolute guarantee that, in the final analysis, it will not fail. The great institutions of the world come and go, but the church of Jesus Christ will remain. Jesus said of the church that ‘the gates of hell shall not prevail against it’ (Matt. 16:18).... The church is the Holy Spirit’s institution. Surely the Spirit works in the lives of people in a host of other institutions, but the church is the focal point of the Spirit’s ministry.... The church has the preaching of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments, and the worship of God in corporate gatherings, and this is where Christians gather together in fellowship. In so far as this is the principal domain of the Holy Spirit and the place where the saints gather, the church can be called ‘holy’” (267-268).

Consider the Lord’s Supper: “When Jesus instituted the Supper, he also said, ‘I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes’

(Luke 22:18. From that we see that the Lord’s Supper also causes us to think of the future when we will sit at the table of the Lord in heaven, at the marriage feast of the Lamb. There is a future orientation to the Lord’s Supper. At the same time, there is the present benefit of meeting the risen Christ in person at His table every time we participate in the Supper. So there is a present reality, a remembrance of things past, and an anticipation of the blessed future that God has promised for His people” (292).

What is the place of the church in the kingdom of God? “In answer to their question about the kingdom, Jesus gave the fundamental mission of the church. Men would be blind to His kingship, so His disciples were given the task of making it visible. The fundamental task of the church is to bear witness to the kingdom of God. Our King reigns now, so for us to put the kingdom of God entirely in the future is to miss one of the most significant points of the New Testament. Our king has come and has inaugurated the kingdom of God. The future aspect of the kingdom is its final consummation” (307).

On hell, he writes, “In the final analysis, we did not know the details of hell, and if we are honest, we must admit that we do not *want* to know. However, if we take the words of Jesus and the Apostles seriously, we need to take hell seriously. If we really believed the biblical testimony about hell, it would change not only the way we live but the way we work in terms of the mission of the church” (330).

On heaven, he writes, “The radiance of the glory of God and of the Lamb will illumine the whole city, and there will never be night because the glowing, brilliant, radiant glory of God never stops. Heaven will be aglow with the unvarnished, unveiled radiance of God.... Every hope and joy that we look forward to – and then some – will abound in this wonderful place. Our greatest moment will be when we walk through the door and leave this world of tears and sorrow, this valley of death, and enter into the presence of the Lamb” (335).

The notion of reading more than 300 pages of systematic theology might, on first consideration, seem to be a dull assignment. Yet, as these quoted examples demonstrate, this text comes from a Reformed scholar with a Spirit-blessed gift for the exposition of God’s Word. Here is an intricate and coherent, even exciting, understanding of God’s revelation of Himself in nature and Scripture. This book is a contemporary effort to tell afresh how God’s story is an organic, meaningful and consistent whole that culminates in the glory of His salvation for His people.