
Pro Rege

Volume 18 | Number 1

Article 14

September 1989

Theology in Turmoil: The Roots, Course and Significance of the Conservative-Liberal Debate in Modern Theology (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Vander Stelt, John C. (1989) "Theology in Turmoil: The Roots, Course and Significance of the Conservative-Liberal Debate in Modern Theology (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 18: No. 1, 38 - 39.

Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol18/iss1/14

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A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

modern world that finds a place for the church but follows different rules than the Christian rule we think we see in Holy Scripture . . . and I also found in this secularized Christian world a church or Christianity that for all its earnestness and zeal and inwardness and active and loving effort was much too closely related to this modern world One day I had a shock, for I found something different in the Bible, unlike the godlessness of the world and the godlessness of the church and Christianity . . . (51)

This positive feature of his life and work, in direct opposition to the tidal waves and undertows of humanism, is perhaps one reason why many evangelical Christians have shown increasing interest in Barth's work and why *A Karl Barth Reader* has been translated into English in commemoration of his birth in 1886. We do well to keep

Theology in Turmoil: The Roots, Course and Significance of the Conservative-Liberal Debate in Modern Theology, Alan P.F. Sell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986). 199 pp. \$9.95. Reviewed by John C. Vander Stelt, Professor of Theology and Philosophy.

Alan Sell, secretary of World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and author of *The Great Debate*, which deals with the controversy between Calvinists and Arminians, describes in *Theology in Turmoil* the roots, course, and lessons learned from the debate between conservatives and liberals. It is his hope that "general readers and students will gain a bird's eye view of a fascinating period of shifting landmarks in theology" (8).

Sell reviews the rise of immanentism, higher criticism, evolutionism, and Ritschlian liberalism. In chapter 1, "Immanentism and the Gospel," he describes the "suggestive" and "elusive" views of Kant (1724-1804), especially the distinction between "phenomena" and "noumena" the belief that man is law-giver, and the postulates of autonomous reason concerning God, freedom, and immortality.

He points out the anti-supernatural views of Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and his "attractive" and "disturbing" theory of "pious feeling" as source of religious consciousness or means to become immediately aware of spiritual absolutes.

Finally, he describes the dialectical philosophy of Hegel (1770-1831), and its impact on British neo-Idealistic thinkers like E. Caird (1835-1908), T.H. Green (1836-1892), F.N. Bradley (1846-1924), B. Bosanquet (1848-1923), and several other romantic thinkers.

According to Sell, through immanentism in general God has come closer to human beings, and through romanticism in particular the limitations of naturalism and deism are avoided, but both introduce erroneous views on human beings and history and distort the distinction between

in mind his statement in 1959, during a discussion of "Pietism and Theology":

My advice to you is that you drop the name Pietism. All words that end with "ism" are bad. Calvinism! I do not want to be called a Calvinist. Lutheranism is even worse. We should not espouse any "ism." Simply stand for an evangelical Christianity. Servants do not have to become "fathers." What counts is the person of Christ. (61)

This book reminds, or teaches for the first time, about the mystique, limitations, sensitivities, and power of Karl Barth as a major twentieth-century critic of Western culture and theologian. It shows his intentions were biblical but his actual thinking-patterns, irony of ironies, were influenced by religious assumptions against which he fulminated, even thundered. Thus *A Karl Barth Reader* is a helpful publication.

Creator and creature, the uniqueness of Christ, and the real nature and effects of sin.

In chapter 2, "The Rise and Reception of Modern Biblical Criticism," Sell briefly summarizes the biblical criticism of such liberal thinkers as Spinoza (1632-1677), J. Locke (1632-1704), H.R. Reimarus (1694-1768), F.C. Baur (1792-1860), D.F. Strauss (1808-1874), R. Whately (1787-1863), W.R. Smith (1846-1894) and others, and by such conservatives as F.A.G. Tholuck (1719-1779), E.W. Hengstenberg (1802-1869), F.J. Delitzsch (1813-1890), and B.B. Warfield (1851-1921).

Similarly, Sell briefly surveys in chapter 3 the theory and theme of evolution. Basic to the views of C. Lyell, H. Spencer, C. Darwin, H. Bergson, A. Whitehead, C. Hartshorn, S. Ogden, and J. Cobb, are the underlying themes of optimism, progress, and evolution as God's way of revelation.

In chapter 4, the author describes the contribution of Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889), a neo-Kantian theologian. Though critical of positivism, materialism, Hegelianism, etc., Ritschl placed the subjective before the objective, fruits before roots, reconciliation before redemption, consciousness of values before divine rules, and kingdom as humanity's moral end before kingdom as God's gift. Sin as not rebellion but ignorance, and the "work" and "person" of Christ, must be viewed in terms of Kant's distinction between, respectively "phenomena" and "noumena."

Finally, in chapters 5 and 6 on "Conservatives and Liberals in Theology" and "Conservatives, Liberals and the Gospel," Sell links "a confused, and sometimes, con-

fusing, tapestry in which immanentist, higher critical, evolutionary and Ritschlian strands all have their parts to play” to the “conservative-liberal” debate (87). Sensitive to the complexity of issues involved, he distinguishes between the *fundamentalist*-liberal conflict and the *conservative*-liberal debate:

Fundamentalism . . . never made the orchestrated impact upon Britain that it did upon America; nor was the millenarian impetus as great in the former nation as in the latter; and within America itself the Mennonites, the Calvinists of the Christian Reformed Church, and the Lutherans of the Missouri Synod—all theologically conservative—were not shaken by the fundamentalist-liberal convulsions of the nineteen twenties and thirties to anything like the degree that the larger of the Baptist and Presbyterian churches were. (91)

The conservative-liberal debate must be placed in the context of the larger battle for the hearts and minds of people that raged throughout the Western world at that time. In terms of Abraham Kuyper’s *Lectures on Calvinism*: “. . . Christianity is imperilled by great and serious dangers. Two life systems are wrestling with one another, in mortal combat” (108).

Sell makes many interesting comments in these last two chapters about such things as the role of millenarian and holiness movements, Arminian and latitudinarian thinking, the nature of Scripture and essence of Gospel, the need for conversion and Christian witness in society, and the views of J. Gresham Machen, C. Van Til, J. Murray, H. Bavinck, H. Dooyeweerd, C.F. Henry, etc. (Surprisingly, Sell does not mention G.C. Berkouwer, the

renowned Reformed dogmatician at the Free University in Amsterdam.)

Concerning those who advocate the doctrine of the plenary inspiration of Scripture and those who believe that only biblical doctrines are inerrant, Sell comments: “We cannot yet pronounce a verdict upon this debate, though we may dare to hope that the pursuit of inerrancy will not become a world-denying hobby” (144). Sell’s desire for a balanced approach to this long and often tense debate is clearly summarized in a quote from I.J. Hesselink:

. . . The real problem is that some “evangelicals,” like old-time liberals, have operated with a truncated Bible, despite their formal acknowledgement of its authority. They have rung the changes of John 3:16 and Acts 16:31—“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved”—but they have conspicuously ignored the social significances of the Magnificat and the Beatitudes. They have reveled in passages like Isaiah 1:18—“Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be white as snow”—but have paid little heed to a major motif in the prophets as summarized in Amos 4:25—“Let justice roll down like waters of righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (144-145)

What makes Sell’s book worthwhile to read and reflect on, including many of his extensive endnotes on pages 147-191, is his emphasis on the historical roots and larger context for the conservative-liberal debate and his desire that the Scripture of God not be separated from the God of the Scriptures.

Faith of Our Fathers: Religion and the New Nation, Edwin S. Gaustad (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987). 139 pp. \$15.95. Reviewed by Louis Y. Van Dyke, Professor of History.

Edwin S. Gaustad, Professor of History at the University of California, Riverside, traces the movement from religious toleration to religious liberty which occurred during the first fifty years following United States independence. His theme is that while we may yearn for the good old days when life was less complicated, the fact is that people faced choices and options no less bewildering then than now. Not the least of these questions was over the precise role that religion ought to play in the public arena as well as in private life. While historians Mark Noll and Nathan Hatch argue that the center of American intellectual life changed from religion to politics during the Revolutionary era, Gaustad’s thesis is that religion played as important a part in shaping the new nation as did politics (in fact, in the minds of the founding fathers, the two could not be separated), and that between the years 1776-1826 many “course-plotting”

decisions were made.

The era was marked by religious anxiety as the “. . . concern for individualism pulled against the concern for community, a tension that persisted through succeeding generations, a tension that demanded and demands the best of both reflection and resolve” (136). Ratification of the Constitution raised questions of tremendous religious concern. That document stated, in effect, that religious matters simply were not to be the business of the state. There was to be no national church and no “symbolic center” around which Americans could unite. Thus, as the nation moved from a period of established churches to one of disestablishment, difficult questions arose which demanded answers—questions which persisted for the next two hundred years. Can morality be separated from religion? Is religion necessary to maintain social order? Is it possible, much less desirable, for