
Pro Rege

Volume 51 | Number 3

Article 6

March 2023

Faith and Reason and the Reformations (Book Review)

Keith C. Sewell

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sewell, Keith C. (2023) "Faith and Reason and the Reformations (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 51: No. 3, 29 - 30.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol51/iss3/6

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Terence J. Kleven, editor, *Faith and Reason and the Reformations*. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, Lexington Books, 2022. ISBN: 978-1-79-360688-4, viii+252 pp. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Professor Emeritus of History, Dordt University.

Martin Luther is famously reported to have declared before the Diet of Worms on April 18, 1521,

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God.

Luther declared himself bound to the Scriptures, even as “clear reason” also had a place. In 1521, the debate on the relationship between faith and reason already had a long trajectory and has continued, also within Protestantism, for centuries.

Accordingly, *Faith and Reason in the Reformations* may be seen as one more contribution to an immense and ongoing debate. The volume is edited by Terence Kleven, who is the Jacob and Gela Schnucker Sessler Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Central College, Pella, Iowa. Its twelve chapters are the fruit of a conference held in October 2017 to reflect on the significance of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter Reformation. Kleven reports that,

The intent of the conference was not simply to be an historical study ... nor was it to promote one account of theology over another ... [; rather,] we examined together the philosophical question of the relation between faith and reason, between theology and philosophy, between religion and science ... over the past five hundred years (1-2).

Such an objective is nothing if not ambitious, even if conducted in a commendably irenic spirit (17-18). The twelve contributions are diverse, and as is often the case with such symposia, each author’s contribution does not necessarily dovetail comfortably with the others. All cannot be assessed in a short review. Even so, there is good material here, worthy of further reflection. Of the “keynote speakers,” Jennifer Hockenbery, on the role of reason in

post-reformation Protestantism, is constructively provocative (39-55), while Al Wolters provides this discussion with much needed undergirding structural insight, which he provides with pleasing lucidity. He draws upon the work of Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) to good effect (75-90).

The second portion of this book consists of “Core Treatises from the Medieval to Modern Periods.” In his “Introduction,” Kleven provides an overview of the twelve contributions (13-16)—but perhaps inevitably they amount to a disparate offering. It is not always clear how each relates to the others. Among the contributions under this heading, three papers stood out for this reviewer. Judson Marvel, on “The Impotency of Reason in Calvin’s Account of Natural Law and Natural Reason” (143-155), wrestles with the noetic impact of sin on our thinking. Scott Culpepper’s paper on “Faith and Reason behind the Throne: Francis Bacon’s Integral Correlation of Religious Convictions and Inductive Curiosity” (159-175) addresses the thorny question of Bacon’s actual stance towards Christian belief in the wake of his rejection of Aristotelian scholasticism. And in “Teaching Christianly: Competing Christian Perspectives on the Student, Teacher, Curriculum, Purpose of Education, Calling, and Truth” (217-236), Stephen Holtrop draws upon the work of Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962) and raises a whole range of issues that cry out for further treatment.

Christians are divided in many ways. Some of the divisions are long-standing; some amount to deep-seated fault lines. On the protestant side of things, men such as Martin Bucer (1491-1551), Richard Baxter (1615-91), and Philip Schaff (1819-93) have reflected deeply on the divisions of the visible church. Back in October 2017, the conference saw itself “as the starting point for an inquiry into the question of the possibility of the unity of the Church” (1). Alas, the editor has not provided us with any kind of retrospect. The reader therefore is left with no clear indication as to what the conference actually concluded concerning the prospects

of ecclesiastical union. Were there any agreed conclusions?

At the end of his “Introduction,” Kleven draws our attention to the episode in which Jeremiah purchased a field from his cousin Hanamel notwithstanding the threat of immediate judgement and devastation, the point being that the LORD keeps his promises however unpropitious the circumstances (Jeremiah 32: 6-15). This Kleven ties to the passage in Christ’s high priestly prayer concerning the unity of God’s people (“that they may all be one:” see John 17: 20-24).

Certainly it behoves all Christians to reflect on the seemingly intractable problem of disunity amongst the churches. The Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant branches all affirm the three great statements—the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Constantinopolitan Creed, and the Athanasian

Creed. They hold much that is central in common. Yet the issues that divide them are deep and profound. And characteristically differing views of “reason” and “tradition” undoubtedly help explain the depth of the divisions.

That said, this reviewer has come away from these papers further confirmed in the conviction that colloquia of this sort, while they may deepen mutual respect and understanding, will not resolve the problem of Christian disunity. How are we to avoid the twin perils of fratricidal separatism *and* undermining syncretism? This cannot be done by negotiation or strategizing. However insightful our understanding, reunion is beyond human capability.

Surely the answer is that this can happen among us only by a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. May we continue to reflect on these questions, also with prayer and fasting.