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Fourth Day (Book Review)

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The Faith of the Church. M. Eugene Osterhaven, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982, 248 pages, \$11.95. Reviewed by Wayne A. Kobes, Assistant Professor of Theology.

M. Eugene Osterhaven, Professor of Systematic Theology at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, sets out to give a Reformed perspective on the historical development of the Church's faith. To trace significant developments in the Church's belief over a span of nearly two thousand years within the confines of approximately 250 pages at first strikes one as pretentious, to say the least! Yet, the author does an admirable job in tackling the task which he set before himself.

In his first chapter Osterhaven focuses on preliminary considerations, focusing specifically on the nature and task of theology as well as on the general development of doctrine in the Church. By revealing his own theological assumptions, Osterhaven enables the reader to understand more fully the study which follows. Chapter one reflects a classical Reformed understanding of the nature and task of theology, an understanding which is both its strength and its weakness. Although the author clearly defines "theology" and "doctrine," he fails to break through the dualistic and scholastic approaches that have plagued the Reformed community since the time of Beza, reflecting little evidence of the insights of A. Kuyper and other more recent Reformed theologians on this matter. In addition, he could benefit the readers by defining more carefully what he means by the term "church."

Nevertheless, having laid a foundation and having clarified a number of important concepts, Osterhaven reaches back into the faith of Israel in an attempt to summarize crucial underpinnings of the early Christian Church. With both brevity and clarity, the author discusses the existence of God, revelation, covenant, creation, grace, and the eschatological hope of Israel.

At this point the study moves into a very helpful discussion of the early Church's struggles relating to the doctrines of the Trinity and Jesus Christ as God and man. Again, the author's teaching ability shines through the text as he repeatedly makes complex issues understandable in few words. Several of the significant heresies which faced the early Church are summarized in this section.

Having provided a good foundation in exploring the struggles of the early Church relating to the Trinitarian and Christological debates, Osterhaven focuses on the Church's struggles concerning Scripture, the nature and extent of sin, the atonement, justification by faith, the Church, the sacraments, Christian freedom, John Calvin on the Holy Spirit, experiential Christianity, eschatology, and the relevance of faith today.

Chapter fourteen, "John Calvin: Order and the Holy Spirit," is especially interesting. Osterhaven appreciatively discusses major insights of the great Reformer in such a way as to show their relevance for the believing community today. The chapter serves well as a succinct primer in crucial elements of Calvin's thought.

Apart from concerns expressed above concerning Osterhaven's understanding of "theology" and "doctrine," I found *The Faith of the Church* to be an excellent overview of major developments in the belief of the Church. It is clearly and interestingly written and reflects a high level of scholarship. Throughout, Osterhaven has successfully avoided unnecessary abstractions and is always concerned to show the relevance of issues for life today. This book is a valuable resource for reading Christians who want to understand better the roots of their faith.

The Fourth Day, by Howard J. Van Till, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986, 286 pages, \$9.95 paper. Reviewed by Russell Maatman, Professor of Chemistry.

On the fourth day of creation God made the sun and the moon. According to Genesis 1:16, "He also made the stars." Howard Van Till, a professor of physics and astronomy at Calvin College, wrote this book to discuss the creation and history of the heavens. Van Till also includes other parts of creation in his discussion. He gives his view of the relation between biblical revelation and natural scientific results. The subtitle, "What the Bible and the Heavens are telling us about the Creation," a reference to Psalm 19:1, is a summary of the book.

Van Till's position in the creation-evolution debate is as follows: both the Bible and scientific results are to be taken seriously, but the contents of the Bible and the results of scientific discovery constitute answers to different ques-

tions. Therefore, says Van Till, the Bible and natural science cannot conflict. What does the Bible tell us about the relation of God to creation? The author says that the Bible teaches God is the Creator, the Preserver or Sustainer, the Governor, and the Provider. In other words, the Bible tells us about the relation between God and creation. The natural sciences do not describe this relation. Rather, natural scientific results describe the creation. For questions about the relation between creation and God, seek answers in the Bible. For questions about the nature of creation, seek answers by carrying out scientific study. Van Till takes the position that most modern controversy concerning origins arises because questions which should be addressed to the Bible are asked of the natural sciences and questions

which should be addressed to the natural sciences are asked of the Bible.

Accordingly, the book consists of three parts. In the first part, Chapters 1-5, Van Till explains his view of the nature of the Bible and what it teaches us about the relation between God and creation. The second part, Chapters 6-9, provides his understanding of the kind of information which can be obtained from natural scientific study of creation and the current status of astronomical conclusions. The third part, Chapters 10-12, brings together the two views and includes a discussion of the current creation-evolution debate. Van Till rejects the basis of that debate and refuses to identify himself with any of the positions—creationist, theistic evolutionist, and so forth. Instead, he adopts a “creationomic” position:

Creationomic science is natural science placed into the framework of the biblical worldview—the system of thought based on the revelation that the material world is God’s Creation, that the Creation is dependent on God both for its existence and for its lawfully governed behavior, and that all phenomena occur under divine direction toward the goal of redemption in Christ. (p. 213)

The book is well-written and is a cogent defense of the view taken. In chapters 7-9 Van Till describes very well modern astronomical methods and current results. The reader is made to see clearly how we know what we do about our galaxy and other galaxies. The picture presented is fascinating and breath-taking.

But I have difficulty with Van Till’s understanding of the relation between biblical revelation and natural scientific activity. Van Till holds that the history and behavior of the kinds of things which natural scientists study—stars, animals, rocks, and so forth—can be explained by the kinds of descriptive laws which scientists formulate; examples of such laws are the law of gravitation and the law of the conservation of energy. Of course, natural scientists always depend upon this assumption. But Van Till then concludes that there is no need to accept unexplainable events, such as an instantaneous appearance of any animals or plants. Evidently he would make the same conclusion concerning the appearance of human beings. Thus, for him both stars

and life evolve according to natural laws. But the Bible does report some once-only, unexplainable events. Can natural scientists explain the resurrection of many people on the day of the Crucifixion (Matt. 27:52-3)? Or the creation of a snake from a staff, and the reverse (Ex. 4:2-4)? I agree that astronomers can understand star evolution using only known laws. I assume their conclusions are correct. On the other hand, modern scientific theories have been unable to explain certain parts of the supposed evolutionary development of life. In view of the failure of natural scientific law in such matters, why assume that living things did not suddenly appear? Why is one once-only, unexplained event accepted and the other not? I recognize that accepting certain events as unexplainable can contribute to thinking that God is more active in some events than others; also, such an attitude could discourage research. Yet it does not seem wise to discount the possibility of God acting in ways we will never be able to understand.

Another problem is Van Till’s insistence that we ask only the “right” questions of the Bible and of creation. What if the Bible does contain material useful to modern scientists? Then, if a list of questions which the Bible answers takes into account everything in the Bible, some of the questions will be scientifically useful. The reason I wonder about Van Till’s list of questions is that they would prevent us from using the Bible to help with specific natural scientific problems. After all, according to the Bible, creation has a finite age. Therefore, cosmologies which call for infinite age, with all of the accompanying natural scientific conclusions, are wrong. Here is another example: Is it not possible that geneticists might benefit from the knowledge that the gene pool of the entire human race derives from the genes present in two human beings, not from the genes of a large number of pre-human beings?

Using Van Till’s approach, problems arise concerning the nature of the human race, problems of its unique relation to God, its calling, its destiny, and so forth. These matters do not, however, play a prominent role in *The Fourth Day*, and so I shall not discuss them further.

I appreciate Van Till’s spirit and carefulness. Many people ought to read this book and evaluate its arguments. Perhaps the Christian community can work together harmoniously in discovering the relation between the different ways God has chosen to speak to human beings.