

John C. Clark and Marcus Peter Johnson, *A Call to Christian Formation: How Theology Makes Sense of Our World*

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), pp. xiii + 208. \$22.99

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This timely volume addresses a problem that is both pervasive and urgent: intentional theological reflection has been marginalised not only in the general culture of the post-industrial world, but also in large sectors of the church itself. As the authors note, ever since the Enlightenment allegedly objective modes of inquiry and cognition, usually empirical, have claimed epistemic primacy, rendering suspect knowledge based on a unique revelation. Christianity has often responded to this challenge by trying to legitimate its convictions by grounding them in other types of knowledge that are reputed to be more basic and certain. Meanwhile, the broader culture has identified the goal of human life with various forms of purely this-worldly flourishing and succumbed to a utilitarian pragmatism.

Against these trends the authors object that theology is absolutely vital for the well-being of the Christian faith and humanity in general. Theology shapes how people construe reality as a whole and strive to harmonise their lives with that reality. It is the cultivation of new ways of reasoning and desiring, so that human hearts and minds are not conformed to worldly conceptualities. The volume aptly subverts the perception that theology is esoteric, narrowly cognitive and of little practical relevance. Rather, Christian theology is a comprehensive interpretive framework aimed at engendering the deepest joy, delight and contentment that humans can experience.

In describing the content of Christian theology, the authors implicitly locate themselves in the theological trajectory that includes Karl Barth, Thomas Torrance and John Webster. In fact, the book is a miniature systematic theology in that tradition. The account of the content of Christian faith is unabashedly christocentric, for knowledge of God, humanity and the created order is mediated through the incarnate Christ. Because the order and substance of theological inquiry must begin with the revelation of the Word in Jesus Christ, theology can be described as a considered, deliberate and rapt response to the divine address of God in Christ.

According to the authors, Jesus embodies the innermost reality of God, which is self-giving love. The incarnation is the enactment *ad extra* of the divine reality *in se*, mediating the divine life to humanity. Paradoxically, at the same time that Jesus is God-with-us, he is also the perfect enactment and measure of human nature as God intended it to be. The authors insist that the incarnation is not an afterthought in the divine plan or a mere remediation of sin. Rather, God's solidarity with humanity has eternally been the goal and context of all reality.

The authors argue against generic theism and all self-generated conceptions of deity, for the trinitarian nature of God is the foundation of the incarnation. The love poured out to humanity in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is an expression of the love of the Father for the Son in the Spirit. The creation of the world is born out of the

love of the Father for the Son because God's inner being is an eternally generative life-giving harmony of persons. God's intention is to draw the creation into the joy of God's interpersonal relationality. Because our true being is found in communion with God and others, individualistic conceptions of the *imago Dei* are dangerously misleading.

Based on these foundational convictions, the authors contend that the church is not just a collection of like-minded people, but is the living and personal body of Christ where Christ joins his life to the faithful. In proclamation Christ speaks as a living, active subject and through the sacraments makes himself present. The liturgies of the church shape our identities and counteract all the worldly liturgies that inculcate illusory notions of human flourishing. Whole-hearted immersion in the life and ministry of the church is the necessary context for knowing God in general, and for doing theology in particular. The authors further conclude that paradox and mystery are necessary qualities of genuine theology, for conformity to secular modes of rationality would reduce Christianity to an echo of worldly discourse. The eschatological orientation of the faith should inspire an orientation to the future that further resists the world's assumptions about historical probabilities.

The volume's account of Christian theology's importance in shaping lives and its need to resist domination by other forms of discourse is powerful and valuable. Nevertheless, the book exhibits some internal tensions. While it claims to be equally distant from leftist and rightist ideologies, sometimes its list of secular idolatries includes items that are dear only to the political right. For example, it is not clear how a critique of 'transgenderism' follows necessarily from the doctrines of Trinity and incarnation. In such instances the volume may be guilty of the very conformity to alien conceptualities that it so rightly condemns. Also, while it describes its project as ecumenical, its attachment to one particular theological trajectory excludes other plausible and pious construals of the Christian story. Not even within the Reformed heritage is there a universally accepted ecclesiology. Perhaps the Christian faith and Christian theology are even more mysterious and multi-vocal than this volume sometimes suggests.

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Matt R. Jantzen, *God, Race, and History: Liberating Providence*

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Matt R. Jantzen's *God, Race, and History: Liberating Providence* is not exactly a retrieval of the classical doctrine. Rather, by means of intellectual history and constructive theology, Jantzen diagnoses the doctrine of providence as beholden to problematic visions of white western male dominance and attempts to reconstruct it in light of this diagnosis. Ultimately, Jantzen hopes 'both to liberate the doctrine of providence