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Alan P.F. Sell

Confessing the Faith Yesterday and Today: Essays Reformed, Dissenting, and Catholic (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2013), xii + 305 pp., £24.00, ISBN 9780227174197.

This book consists of articles—most of which have been already published—and is divided into two parts, called ‘Confessing the Faith in Context’ and ‘Confessing the Faith Ecclesially and Hopefully.’ Alan Sell served in Geneva as Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches; he held the Chair of Christian Thought at the University of Calgary and the Chair of Christian Doctrine and Philosophy of Religion at the University of Wales.

Sell’s rejection of confessionalism and emphasis on the active confessing of the faith reminds one of the saying that Christians can believe their confessions without confessing what they believe (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:106, with a reference to A. Schweizer). His approach, however, prompts the question whether and how confessions—if they are basically understood as doxological statements—can unmask and correct heresy in the church.

Sell acknowledges that confessions ‘erect doctrinal road blocks against unto-ward doctrines’ (6) but also claims that we are not allowed to un-church one another over differences of linguistic expression as long as we own a common Savior. The problem is not that I disagree with that—who would?—but that heretics always tend to claim that they believe in the same Savior and that their heresies are only differences in linguistic expression.

In explaining, applying—and even in maintaining—the confessions we must keep in mind how much they were influenced by the time and specific context in which they were versed. Sell keeps reminding us how contextual the confessions are. Acknowledging this is helpful to maintain the love for the gospel as the core of these doctrinal statements.

Sell often illustrates his argument with beautiful quotes, for example from John Owen’s introduction to the Savoy Declaration: ‘The Spirit of Christ is in himself too free [...] to be used by any humane arm, to whip men into belief; he drives not, but gently leads into all truth’ (13). Reading Sell—especially for those who have had the privilege of hearing some of his lectures—is a delight because of his tongue in cheek sense of humor. Reflecting on the practical importance of Christian eschatology, Sell remarks ‘John Flavel was expert in encouraging saints under trial: “It is no small comfort to the saints that this world is the worst place that they shall ever be in”’ (262).

The many quotations reveal the author’s wide knowledge of the sources, but sometimes it is not so easy to find out precisely what he himself wants to say. He quotes reformers—Calvin understandably most often among them, and Puri-

tans like John Owen and Richard Baxter—but above all the congregationalist P.T. Forsyth (1848–1921), ‘the most stimulating British theologian of the twentieth century’ (6 n. 3).

Sell’s emphasis on the centrality of the cross and his characterization of Christian spirituality as a life of pilgrimage resemble the theological position of Abraham van de Beek. An extended version of his essay on eschatology for Van de Beek’s *Festschrift* is published here as well as a chapter in which he reflects on Van de Beek’s ‘overstated’ plea for religion without ulterior motive. The difference between the two theologians lies in Sell’s explicit claim that the gospel is relevant to all people and in his concern for the proper communication of the gospel in the context of modernity.

For Sell systematic theology is the articulation of the supreme revelation of God in his saving act and nothing else. He criticizes those systematicians ‘who continue to take us on an orderly Cook’s tour [...] from creation to eschatology’ (286) to leave alone those who puzzle over the question ‘With whom have I not yet compared or contrasted Barth?’ (287).

Of course, one of the disadvantages of a collection of essays always concerns the coherence of the whole. Although the author acknowledges that there might be some repetition, especially in the quotations, the book is diverse enough to keep the reader interested. There seems to be some arbitrariness, however, in the choice of the two parts and in the decision where to place the essays. Confessing ‘ecclesially and hopefully’ only seems to flow from the simple fact that the essays in part two deal with Sell’s view of the church and—but that only holds for one essay—of eschatology. But this criticism, just like the fact that the eleven bibliographies could have easily been merged, relates more to the editing of the volume than to the inspiring and thought-provoking content of the essays.

In ‘An Epilogue Light-hearted in Style, Serious in Intention,’ subtitled ‘Confessing the faith in systematic theology,’ Sell summarizes his theological position. In the title of the chapter, however, the term ‘light-hearted’ from the table of contents (viii) is replaced by ‘cheerful’ (268). In nine and a half theses—out of respect for Luther—he explains how the redemptive act of the God of holy love accomplished at the cross of Christ is the locus of God’s supreme revelation; ‘at the cross something is done, not merely shown’ (269). This revelation is astounding because it is for sinners and it is authoritative—relativizing the church, all official and confessional theology and even the New Testament—because Christianity completely rests on the one fact of redemption.

Sell again refers to Forsyth claiming that the authority of the Church, the Bible and everything else depends on being ‘sacramental of this final and absolute authority of the Creator as Redeemer’ (275). God can save *us* because he is

human and he can *save* us because he is divine. This revelation is appropriated by faith as gift of the Spirit and accommodated to our intelligence. It is angular, because 'it divides humanity into those who stand for God, or for the world, the flesh and the devil' (276).

This essay is characteristic of Sell's theology, because it focuses exclusively on Christ the Savior who reveals God as the Creator-Redeemer of holy love. It is both creative in its playing with words and still—or rather therefore—so compelling and convincing. It is also a beautiful example of living Reformed systematic theology, testifying to God's grace with the Bible, the Christian tradition and the intellectual culture's discussion partners: exactly what systematic theology is supposed to be according to Sell (289).

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