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Review: The Future as God's Gift: Explorations in Christian Eschatology

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must be resolved in the question "How do we know?" If there are remaining problems in the historic Christian view of God (as set forth, for example, in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*) they must be solved through a greater understanding of how God has made himself known to humanity. The apostle Paul affirms that God is known through general revelation, and this is not a bare knowledge but involves God's eternal power and divine nature. As the Church strives for unity, a greater understanding of God's nature as revealed in general revelation is required to avoid the inherent problems of systems like phenomenology.

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The Future as God's Gift: Explorations in Christian Eschatology. Explorations in Contemporary Theology series. Edited by David Fergusson and Marcel Sarot. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000, ix + 252 pp., $29.95 paper.

The Future as God's Gift is an annual volume in the Explorations in Contemporary Theology series, produced by the Society for the Study of Theology. Each year the Society's annual conference is theme-centered; Christian eschatology (the theme of its 1999 meeting at the University of Edinburgh) clearly played off the fascination with Y2K. From the proceedings of that conference, certain papers and responses were selected for inclusion, along with two essays solicited for this volume.

To overview the sixteen chapters that comprise the volume, following an introduction by Fergusson there are six main papers, three conference responses, four short papers, and the two solicited essays. The most noteworthy are the following: (1) the Society's presidential paper by Anthony Thiselton, "Signs of the Times: Toward a Theology for the Year 2000 as a Grammar of Grace, Truth and Eschatology in Contexts of So-Called Postmodernity"; (2) Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart's "The Shape of Time"; (3) a translated essay by Jurgen Moltmann, "Is the World Coming to an End or Has Its Future Already Begun? Christian Eschatology, Modern Utopianism and Exterminism"; (4) the conference's "Dogmatic Theses on Eschatology," as edited by Colin Gunton; (5) Niels Henrik Gregersen's "The Final Crucible: Last Judgement and the Dead-End of Sin"; and (6) Christoph Schwobel's concluding "Last Things First: The Century of Eschatology in Retrospect."

The strengths of *The Future as God's Gift* are many. First, this volume is rich in fresh and creative theological reflection, some of which was helpful for the extraordinarily eschatologically-curious period just before the year 2000. Second, Thiselton's critique of the different forms of postmodernism in the American vs. the European contexts is insightful, particularly his assertion that the American brand is basically neopragmatic. Third, Bauckham and Hart's treatment of issues related to understanding time is appropriate, especially given the bold advances of the openness of God viewpoint on this front. Fourth, it was interesting to track Peter Scott's thinking as he expanded eschatology to include ecology. Much of what he developed, however, was well beyond the bounds of an evangelical theological comfort zone. Indeed, some of it steers close enough to a perception of pantheism that Scott feels it necessary to state in so many words, "This is not pantheism" (p. 105). Fifth, Van den Brom's assertion that the theological perspectives of Pannenberg and Moltmann are "determinism without decrees" (see esp. pp. 163–65) is an angle worth pursuing. Sixth, Schobel's survey of "The Century of Eschatology," though offering relatively few fresh or piercing insights on any of the major developments, does conclude with five thoughtful lessons from the many

and varied eschatological twists and turns of the 1990s that should be considered "before we can discuss the opening hours of the eschatological office in the twenty-first century" (p. 241).

Several weaknesses stand out as well. First, there is astonishingly little in-depth biblical exegesis. Of the 241 pages of text, only about 40 of them (some 16%) contain any sort of biblical reference, and half the chapters in the book make no obvious use of Scripture. So, while there is much creative and in-depth theological reflection in this volume, if (as is traditionally understood) theology is no stronger than the exegesis upon which it is founded, then much if not most of the theology articulated in this volume appears to lack foundation. Second, a good bit of the theological reflection is apparently pushing ongoing issues of theological trendiness on the British/European scene. These issues include annihilationism, feminism (and wider liberation theologies, notably the thinly-veiled vantage point of Kim Yong-Bock's "Practice of Hope: The Messianic Movement of the People Who Practice Hope in Asia"), and ecology. Third, the philosophically-fueled discussion about hell, by Gregersen (see above) and Wilko van Holten (in his "Eschatology with a Vengeance: Hell as the Greatest Conceivable Evil"), although fairly interesting, ranges far from a solid biblical mooring. Though Gregersen does discuss key Scriptural references early on in his essay, it is highly unlikely to be merely coincidence that, when he arrives at the point of laying out the annihilationist theory he champions, all biblical references disappear. Fourth, oddly, there is very little here that deals with what most American evangelicals would consider staple eschatological issues. Yes, the second advent, the kingdom of God, and life after death are assumed and alluded to, but that is the full extent of their treatment, even in the "Dogmatic Theses on Eschatology." It is not at all clear as to whether these topics are viewed as mere launching pads to other more interesting issues or as simply passé (or something in between). Overall, therefore, while the various treatments of eschatology in *The Future as God's Gift* are without question cutting edge, my concern is that much of what is developed appears to have been cut loose from any regulative historic theological rooting.

This volume was clearly designed for the elite ranks of vocational theologians and advanced degree students in that arena. Evangelical theologians should read it, perhaps as much for the analyses and critiques of various contemporary theological and philosophical positions that significantly impact those teaching and doing theology today as anything else. If nothing else, it will help prevent the ever-present tendency to be provincial in our perspective. For those among us who hold to a minutely-detailed doctrinal stance on eschatology, it is healthy to remember that to stretch our thinking and capacity is not the same thing as to broaden our belief structure.

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Sovereign Grace: The Place and Significance of Christian Freedom in John Calvin's Political Thought. By William R. Stevenson, Jr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, xii + 200 pp., $49.95.

This is an interesting book that views Calvin from a different angle than many other recent monographs, probably because the author is a political scientist rather than a theologian or a historian. Stevenson attempts to build on Ralph Hancock's work *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics* (1989). He disagrees with Hancock's argument that Calvin's emphasis on predestination and divine sovereignty robs the public arena