
December 2023

Review of Dr. Beth Felker Jones' Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically

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Recommended Citation

Gordon, Caleb. 2023. "Review of Dr. Beth Felker Jones' Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically." *Eleutheria: John W. Rawlings School of Divinity Academic Journal* 7, (2). <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/elevol7iss2/15>

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Review of Dr. Beth Felker Jones' *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically*

Abstract

This review of *Practicing Christian Doctrine* provides a helpful overview of Dr. Jones' articulate survey through major Christian doctrines and related Christian practice. This resource serves as a succinct, formative primer to Christian theology with an aim at orthopraxy for the maturing Christian.

Keywords

Jones, Doctrine, Church, Formation, Orthopraxy, Evangelical, Ecumenical

Cover Page Footnote

Completed: Bachelor's of Science in Religious Studies: Biblical Languages, May 2023 Pursuing: Master's of Divinity: Biblical Languages, May 2027

Jones, Beth Falkner. *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically*. By Beth Falkner Jones. 2nd Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023. 256 pages. \$27.99.

In *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically*, author and professor Dr. Beth Felker Jones composes an intentionally woven, articulate introduction to Christian doctrine and teaching with a vision for theologically rich orthopraxy based on theological formation. Throughout her thoughtful summary of Christian teaching, Dr. Jones surveys doctrines through this orthopraxical lens, setting up integration between theology in doctrine and theology in practice at the conclusion of each chapter. In this effort, the author masterfully elevates common ground for evangelical Protestants within the landscape of global Christianity, while previewing the differences in theological discourse. Aimed at a popular Christian audience, this work provides an excellent foundation for believers as they seek maturity in faith connected to practice. As she admits at the outset of her book, “The point of our study is to grow in our knowledge of and faithfulness to God” (4). Overall, Dr. Jones’ spin on a theological studies introduction pushes beyond mere academic presentation into a dynamic rallying cry for faithfulness in the life of the Christian church through theological discipleship.

Opening with a recounting of the Josiahic return to covenant commitment in 2 Chronicles 34, Dr. Beth Jones connects this biblical account to the need for knowing Christian doctrine and letting it form Christian practice (1-2). As Jones writes in her introduction, “In studying the things of God, we are formed as worshipers and as God’s servants.” (2) She then initiates her study through key Christian doctrines and practices, framing the journey in the bounds of evangelicalism with an eye to ecumenical considerations (4). Pausing for the sake of clarity, Dr. Jones defines evangelicalism through the four marks of Biblicism, conversionism, activism, and crucicentrism (4-5). She helpfully connects herself to orthodoxy and the Protestant tradition, stemming from the Reformation and expressed in the evangelical movement of Wesley and Whitfield (5). Jones also dissociates herself from “evangelicalism” connected to political abuse and classifies herself between the polar ends of liberal theology and fundamentalism (6-7).

Moving to the essence of theology and the Christian life, Dr. Jones defines theology and shares the invitation into theological discourse to all believers (11). Understanding theology as both formative for and worship by the Christian church, she previews the resources available in theology and their relation to it, using the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience (13-26). As an evangelical Protestant, she gives priority to Scripture in line with *sola scriptura* as a check and balance system in doing theology and in use of the other

resources (16). As she prepares to begin her official survey, Dr. Jones moves to unveiling her goal of bridging the often-created gap between theology and practice through evaluation of the spiritual disciplines, otherwise referenced as the means of grace in the Christian life, in light of theological doctrines (27).

Beginning with the doctrine of the Trinity in her survey, Dr. Beth Jones sees God's revelation of His own character for the purpose of Christian worship to Him and for direction away from formative idol worship (56). She expresses the orthodox Christian understanding of God's self-revelation in eternal Trinity, consistent with the "one" God of the Old Testament and as opposed to historical heresies (56-58). The revelation in the Scriptures of the triune God should serve as the Christian's guide to understanding the Trinity and works against human pride through the apparent paradox involved in the Trinitarian framework (65-67). In relation to practice, the author understands God's identity as Trinity to be the foundation for Christian worship towards a "who" over any preferred methods of worship or to the worship of false idols (71-72).

Discussing the doctrines of creation and providence, Dr. Jones prioritizes the response of dependence on God as creation and His love for His creation over questions of origin and science (78). However, she admits the implications of Christian teaching on creation *ex nihilo* as positioning God rightly as supreme deity in line with the biblical witness (80). The doctrine of creation places God properly in relation to creation as transcendent yet still immanently active, and recognizes the creation's goodness in relation to God (78-84). It also provides an apologetic against gnostic hierarchal dualism, which values the spiritual as opposed to the material (86). Jones also touches on the related doctrine of God's providence, as a persisting theme throughout the Scriptures and through its specific nuances in understanding God's work in the world (89-90). Through these doctrines, Christians are called to faithfulness in practices constituted by and concerned with their created bodies as image-bearers (93).

The arena of theological anthropology evaluates the dimensions of human beings as creature in relation to the Creator (97-99) Dr. Jones highlights human goodness, dependence, and finitude as key elements to human "creaturely-ness," while recognizing the distinction between humanity and other creations through the unity of both spiritual and physical components and the *imago Dei* possessed uniquely by human beings (97-103). In her treatment of the *imago Dei* and its various understandings, the author perceives value in each, reminds of sin's effect on this image, and expresses the Christian teaching of Jesus as the true image (105-113). Jones' connects theological anthropology to the employment of discernment in life using the various perspectives of the *imago Dei* and the possibility of true humanity through Christ (113-116).

Transitioning effortlessly to the person of Jesus from the discussion of Him as the true image of God, Dr. Jones discusses the God-man, Jesus, and

examines the Christological titles ascribed to Him in the biblical witness, attesting to both His divinity and humanity (117-120). In assessment of the myriad of Christological heresies throughout church history, Dr. Jones unveils the underlying motivation of thinkers to smooth out the paradox of Jesus' incarnation and soundly objects to each heresy (125-132). Finally, the author sees the practicing of Christology through iconography in line with the historic teaching of John of Damascus, stepping outside the normative Protestant perspective (135-137).

Evaluating the central doctrine between the person and work of Jesus, Dr. Beth Jones kickstarts soteriology by positioning salvation as moving sinners to being both God's children and citizens to His kingdom, with the benefit of eternal life and the motif of new creation attached (141-143). She surveys the four primary aspects of beginnings, justification, sanctification, and final redemption, as well as popular models for the Christ's atonement (158-161). Pairing soteriology to the practices of baptism and communion, Dr. Jones explains the place of these activities in representing spiritual realities for Protestants (161).

In her approach to pneumatology, Dr. Jones acknowledges the failures of certain Protestant strands with their treatment of God the Spirit, and she reminds of the Nicene Creed's affirmation of the Spirit's personal nature along with the other Persons of the Trinity (167-170). She also establishes the indwelling of the Spirit for believers, the function of believers' bodies as temples, and the place of grace in the Spirit's sanctifying work (177-180). Furthermore, she approaches the controversial discussion of spiritual gifts with a continuationist stance (180-182). Confronting the "spiritual but not religious" attitude in modern North American Christianity, the author adequately exposes often overlooked implications of this slogan, while recognizing certain motivations as pure (176). Finally, she emphasizes the Spirit's work in the current age of biblical metanarrative, and she connects pneumatology practically to prayer in the Spirit and practicing discernment of truth in the Spirit to the Christian life (185-189).

As she moves into ecclesiology, Dr. Jones emphasizes the nature of the one people of God as the church incorporating outsiders, or the gentiles in the biblical witness, for contemporary reflection (191). To correct over-valuing individualist expressions of the Christian faith, the author points to the corporate pictures of the church as the body and bride of Christ (193-194). To establish "marks of the church," Dr. Jones appeals to the Nicene Creed once again, in its evaluation of the church in the attributes of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity (193-199). However, her ecclesiological survey powerfully deals with questions of the failure of the modern church, turning observers to the goodness of God at work in the church's shortcomings using Augustine's treatment of the Donatist baptism for support (200-201). She writes, "Finally, the brokenness of the church is crucial to the beauty of its witness. Without honesty about that

brokenness, our witness to grace is impossible” (202). Jones ends her survey with a discussion of the sacraments and the ecclesiological work of evangelism (207-211).

Finally, Dr. Jones concludes with an analysis on eschatology, distinguishing between present and future dimensions (217-220). Joining the voices of church history in answer to Jesus’ own directive, she presents the need for a Christian anticipation for Jesus’ return (221). In the interim between Jesus’ comings, Dr. Jones prescribes activity in Christ’s body: “The eschatological life is the active life” (221). Following up with the primary hope of resurrection in the manner of Jesus in eschatology, the author comments on the intermediate state of the soul following death and the reality of hell (229-232). She wraps up her discussion with drawing a parallel to Sabbath and eschatological rest, as she finds significance in present activity because of a coming, physical resurrection promise (234-235). To conclude her masterful treatment of Christian doctrine and related practices, Jones offers a benedictory prayer to summarize the ground covered and petition for transformation through the doctrines presented (237-238).

In review of her thoughtful, relevant introduction to Christian theology and the Christian life, Dr. Beth Jones carves a path to orthopraxy while crafting an overview of doctrine with gentle clarity and robust insight. With an evangelical and ecumenical orientation outlined from the beginning, Jones covers a wide array of primary theological frameworks, models, theories, and orthodox confessions for believers both new to the faith and developed in the faith to benefit from (4). To support this mission, she employs voices from the past and present, both near and far to her cultural context to provide credibility to ecumenical unity in Protestant Christianity. While some knowledge or experience in the faith would be recommended to connect fully with her articulate and rich presentation, she intentionally develops the reader’s vocabulary in theological discourse and insightfully looks to contemporary questions and concerns as she lays out the doctrines, offering a dynamic read with an ever-present awareness to context. Perhaps one of the greatest triumphs of the work is its effortless, sequential flow from doctrine to doctrine, building on ground covered with a goal of orthopraxy consistently revisited. While not every implication that she draws from her theological survey will land based on audience, Dr. Beth Jones successfully walks the line of offering in-depth theological education and prompting powerful theological formation at the same time, while seamlessly weaving the two together throughout to accomplish her stated mission.