

*The Faith of the Church:
A Reformed Perspective on Its Historical Development,*

By M. Eugene Osterhaven
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Book Review by

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With the publication of *The Faith of the Church*, Professor M. Eugene Osterhaven has given the Church and a generation of his students to whom he dedicates the work a lucid and concise manual of Christian theology in which he has immersed himself and which he has taught in a long and fruitful teaching ministry. His students will not fail to recognize their professor in the discussion of the Faith as it is here presented in its historical development from a Reformed perspective.

Osterhaven defines theology as “the deliberate and careful consideration of the Christian faith.” Convinced of the necessity of theological reflection on the Faith of the Church, Osterhaven finds the norm of theology in the Scripture and its method in listening to the record of God's self-disclosure found therein. Systematizing is a necessary activity of the human mind which “seeks to relate whatever material is given it into an intelligible pattern” (p. 6), but theological reflection must not be understood as barren intellectualism, for the faith of the Church “comes out of the experience of God's people struggling to hear his Word in the context of life.” (p. 7)

Following a discussion of method and approach, Professor Osterhaven deals with Christian doctrines in the order of their historical development beginning with “the Faith of Israel.” He deals with the doctrines of God, Jesus Christ, Scripture, Man, Sin and Grace, Hope and History, and Atonement.

Then, reflecting his method of treating doctrine in its historical development, Osterhaven deals with the Reformation (“The Recovery of the Gospel”) and goes on to treat Justification by Faith, the Church and the Sacraments, giving an excellent treatment of the thinking of Luther and Calvin on these subjects.

Chapters 13, 14 and 15 constitute an interesting and helpful discussion, which is not common to manuals of Christian doctrine. Osterhaven discusses Luther's conception of “The Freedom of a Christian;” what he maintains is the key to Calvin's theology, “Order and the Holy Spirit;” and, “Experiential Christianity,” a

discussion of religious experience as it grew out of the Reformation and found expression in both the mysticism and activism of Dutch Pietism and Puritanism.

Chapter 16 deals with “Eschatology: The Kingdom, The Spirit, and The End.” Osterhaven touched Eschatology earlier (Chapter 7) when discussing the thought of Augustine but he takes it up here again to acknowledge the theological development of the twentieth century in the face of the crisis of meaning brought on by the cataclysms of history which have been a part of our experience. Brief reference is made to Barth, Cullmann, and a more extended discussion of VanRuler and Pannenberg concerning the place of history in the design of God.

Professor Osterhaven concludes this study with a chapter on “The Relevance of The Faith,” “to focus on the relevance in such a world of Christian theology and the faith of the Church” (p. 213). The author’s personal conviction is clear.

There is only one remedy for this world’s ills: God himself in the person of Christ, God-become-flesh, who has effected redemption and opened the way to reconciliation and blessing. That faith, the message of salvation proclaimed by the apostles, and the theology which studies and articulates it are as relevant today as ever. (p. 213)

Stressing the need for Christian foundations and understanding well theology’s critical function – “...reflection on anything and everything from the point of view of the biblical revelation” (p. 217) – as well as theology’s universal nature, Professor Osterhaven calls the Church to its task so to articulate the Faith that it will “make possible the development of a true humanism.” (221f) Citing Pascal, Osterhaven closes with the strong conviction that the true humanism is “a view of man which sees him, though full of contradictions, as a creature made by and meant for God.” (p. 223)

In being guided through the historical developments of the Faith of the Church, one is immediately impressed with the author’s thorough knowledge and understanding of the material presented. This is no superficial survey of Christian doctrine, but rather a concise summary of the main lines of the faith made possible only by a life-long acquaintance with the material as well as a serious commitment to the truth of the Faith confirmed in deep Christian experience.

The Christian Faith here portrayed is the classic Reformed understanding. If any criticism is to be offered, it is not for what is presented but for what is not acknowledged; there is little cognizance taken of the seriousness of the criticism of the Faith from within the Church through the sifting of the foundations by the critical biblical studies of the last two hundred years and from without the Church through the development of Post-Enlightenment thought, both philosophical and theological, and the growth of secularism.

The author calls us to the critique of modern culture and declares the relevance of the Faith for our contemporary situation. The Faith here presented provides the foundation for the task. One misses the wrenching that is involved in testing the faith by the fires of modern criticism whose seriousness does not come to expression. It remains for us to take the Christian foundations here so lucidly set forth and translate them into the language of contemporary culture that the ancient answers may continue to sound forth, demonstrating the relevance of which the author has no doubt.

This is an excellent study which will be useful to the whole Church. It is a fitting capstone to a long and effective teaching career and the strongest confirmation of its truth is the life of the author, the life of a Christian man, deeply loved and deeply respected by all who have had the privilege of sitting at his feet and being shaped by his faith and life.