

# Robert Culver's *Systematic Theology*

**Review of Robert D. Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical & Historical*, Mentor Books (Christian Focus Publications), 2005, xvii + 1258 pages.**

For a long time now I have been wanting to write a review of Culver's "Systematic Theology" but have always found something else to do. I do not believe this theology has received the attention it deserves. At one point I strongly considered adopting this work as a backbone text for my courses on Systematic Theology (I was weighing up Culver, Erickson, and Lewis & Demarest. I finally decided in favor of Erickson).

Culver has taught both Old Testament and Systematic Theology at top seminaries and is quite well known among dispensationalists for his fine work called *Daniel and the Latter Days* (although he could not be called a dispensationalist). That was a solid read; this one, written many years later, easily qualifies as a tome.

The book is organized around the seven main heads of doctrine employed by many evangelicals: Theology Proper; Anthropology; Hamartiology; Christology; Soteriology; Ecclesiology, and Eschatology. Within each of these sections sit many chapters addressing very many theological questions. These chapters are thorough while remaining reasonably concise, and it appears some care was taken to insure this. There is relatively little excess verbiage within the 1,200 plus pages of the book.

Print size and shade are smaller than is usual today, and the pages are large. I would say that this feature might put off the cursory reader from delving further (it actually encouraged me to read on, but not everyone is like me). Hence, the work is "pint-for-pint" much larger than Grudem or Erickson or Reymond. As a reference work this one exceeds all these.

1. Part One: Theology Proper (2-225) includes a fairly extensive "Introduction" prior to examining The Doctrine of God. Predictably there is a lot of apologetical material included. There are some good quotes in this section: "Reason should not be committed to function independent of faith. In theology faith corresponds with the revealed knowledge of God and serves as a necessary instrument for appropriating divine truth." (24). Some of this material seems to date to an earlier era, which is understandable. Not much is affected by it.

He is clearly an exponent of natural theology (42-43), and despite expressing a wish to understand Van Til's disciples (34) completely misses the thrust of presuppositional apologetics. This led this reviewer to write numerous question marks in the margins on chapters 4 and 5.

Then Culver turns to address revelation before moving on to God Himself. There are good chapters on the "Names of God" and several on the Divine Attributes, which he divides somewhat artificially between "Spirituality", "Unity", "Greatness" and "Goodness" (though he leaves "Impassibility" till later). Culver is well aware of this fact (64) and his grouping does not clog his fine presentation of God's perfections. Then we have two chapters on the Trinity. The author rightly rejects analogies of the Triune nature (118).

When dealing with the doctrine of Creation (chs. 17-18) Culver uses Scripture well and says many good things. He does wrongly identify Process Theology with Pantheism (it holds to Panentheism), but this may be a typo. But his dismissal of Young-Earth models without any serious engagement (to be expected from one who embraces natural theology) is very disappointing, especially as Culver takes pains elsewhere to represent the teachings of others. Solid chapters and appendices covering Providence and related matters end this section.

**2.** Part Two deals with “Anthropology” (228-335) and is outstanding. Culver has leaned quite heavily on the work of Shedd (whom he uses throughout the volume), so it is not surprising to find him adopted traducianism (the derivation of our soulish nature from Adam) and paying attention to the aspects of the soul. In arguing against Hodge’s doctrine of creationism in regard to the soul, he insightfully shows how Hodge developed an inference to creationism but then made this inference “pivotal to much Hodge later has to say about the imputation of Adam’s sin...” (276). While one may want to disagree here and there with the author, this whole treatment of Man is one of the best available.

**3.** Part Three, on the doctrine of Sin (338-417), is again extensive and handled with skill. Although it is the shortest of the sections it is by no means slim. The bases are covered. And there is a very good chapter (ch.9) where Culver reviews the versions of imputation that have been put forward and makes his own suggestion. He also shows that the Westminster divines employed the word “covenant” in a more general sense and not to denote federal headship.

**4.** In Part Four (420-638) we are treated to one of the fullest evangelical expositions of Christology, outside of Berkouwer, that I am aware of. Packed with Scriptures and surveying every facet of the Person and Work of Jesus, this is an impressive study. For one thing, Culver does not skimp on the Pre-Existence of Christ; a doctrine which has its tendrils in so much else that is predicated of the Lord. There are 30 pages devoted to the Virgin Birth and Incarnation, including surveys of non-evangelical accounts. Further on he disagrees with the now common view that Philippians 2:5-11 is a poem borrowed by the Apostle (514). Culver rightly says that such a notion cannot be proved. In the same place he also notes that there “are active and passive elements in all [Christ's] obedience...” It is this sort of independence of thought which the student will find helpful in his theological studies. The author’s willingness to sift opinions is also demonstrated in his chapter on “The Sinless Life of Christ,” where he follows Shedd (again) in holding to the necessary impeccability of Christ based upon a “priority” of His Divine nature over His human nature. To this I would assent, since the doctrine of the union of the two natures of Christ, when compared to the doctrine of Christ’s pre-existence, seems to require such an ontic priority.

On the Atonement, after some good historical discussion, Culver adopts limited atonement and, of course, regeneration before faith (574-575). He does qualify his meaning by opting for Shedd’s more nuanced understanding of the limitation (i.e. the difference between *intent* to apply and *value*). He inserts a small piece on Calvin’s view of the extent of the atonement, but it does not address the important evidence presented by Kendall, Bell and others. He also surprisingly mixes up the Puritan John Owen with the later translator John Owen, who worked for the Calvin

Translation Society in the 19th Century (577). He finishes off with chapters on the Resurrection and Ascension and present work of Christ.

**5.** Part Five is on Soteriology (640-797). The author confesses to having been fascinated with this subject for many years and this section proves the truth of the statement. Notable aspects of this very full exposition are a helpful chapter defining 'regeneration' (as the new birth), and a helpful use of J. P. Boyce's observation that all of the Spirit's sanctifying activity is tied to Scripture (761f.).

I cannot say I was impressed with the author's attempts to show (in various places) that regeneration (or "special calling") precedes faith. His chapter on the "Order of Salvation" was too short and too dependent on John Murray (who despite his book on the subject, fails to properly distinguish the accomplishment from the application of the merits of the Cross). The one on "Calling" was full of implications, not of the NT texts, but of his theological leanings.

**6.** Moving on to the doctrine of the Church (800-1006). This review is already getting too long so I shall abbreviate. Basically, Culver covers all the permutations of the concept "Church" that have been advanced historically. He shows that the NT does not prescribe a single form of church polity, although it does require a regenerate membership and a properly understood congregational system. Baptism is for believers. The Church is not "spiritual Israel" (823), though Culver is no longer a dispensationalist. His chapter on Church Unity is wise and sane. Even while disagreeing sometimes, the whole section is excellent.

**7.** Finally, we come to Eschatology (1008-1156), which begins with an interesting introductory chapter in which Culver lays out his broad understanding of the Last Things. He is clearly an ardent premillenarian, who sees like some before him (e.g. C. Larkin), not a complete annihilation of the present cosmos, but a radical renovation of the created order, to be brought about at the Second Advent. This is a marginal position, and he does not press it, but it is worth looking in to.

There follow solid chapters on what is often called "Personal Eschatology" – including good use of J.A. Schep's work showing among other things that the NT concept of resurrection is always physical, never spiritual. A very good chapter on future judgment comes next, followed by chapters on (literal) Hell and Heaven.

On the Second Coming itself the writer is sure of the truth of an earthly millennial reign of Christ, but he is less sure of the certainty of a pre-tribulational rapture of the Church (he does think it is a possibility – 1130). In fact he omits any detailed discussion of the rapture (he doesn't like the term) from his treatment. I find his discussion illuminating if not altogether convincing. The volume is finished off well with complete bibliography and indices.

As a "front line" text this massive volume can function very well because the author interacts with many different positions while not fighting shy of declaring his own. I personally would place it higher than Grudem's less intimidating work because of its thoroughness, both in historical detail and in topics covered. But that is my opinion. In any case, I would certainly

recommend Robert Culver's book to all students of Systematic Theology. As a reference work it is hard to beat.