

AUSTIN GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

BOOK REVIEW
OF
Great is the Lord: Theology for the Praise of God
by Ron Highfield

SYSTEMATIC CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

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Introduction

I can appreciate Highfield's survey of the traditional Doctrine of God because in many instances, even those of us who study theology either have forgotten some of the details or have never learned them—to our shame. Highfield sets out to map out the traditional Doctrine of God and to defend it. But as he points out, he will defend it not because it is traditional, rather his aim is to show that the traditional view is well rooted in Scripture. He understands the concept of the traditional Doctrine of God, that which teaches that God is triune, loving, merciful, gracious, patient, wise, one, simple, omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, omnipresent, immutable, impassible, glorious and wholly good. He contends that these characteristics which we use to speak of God did not arise solely as philosophical theories, but that the church understood these to be taught in the Scriptures. But in order to arrive at these, Highfield must first lay out a concept of the traditional view of Scripture.

Review

It is Highfield's view that no theology of God can arise solely from natural revelation or natural religion, for these are at best inexact and at worse mis-leading (p. 15). The complete Christian message about God can only be found in Scripture and the church has no business teaching any doctrines apart from this witness. According to Highfield Scripture is the sole authority with which to judge all theological statements and not from the contributions of natural science, metaphysics, psychology, history or sociology (p.19). Scripture is then the central point of the Christian proclamation and it assumes both the existence of God and his willingness to be known by us.

It is thus central to the Christian message that God has made himself known to us by divine revelation in the Holy Scriptures. These, receiving acceptance and shaped into the canon of scripture we have today, are a witness to God's own providence in the preservation of his message by means of his church. It was the task of the church to preserve the apostolic faith and they did so by canonizing the New Testament as Scripture. This served also to protect the faithful from heresy by excluding the use of other writings and traditions as legitimate sources of divine revelation (p. 25). In this way, all theological statements became subject to the scrutiny of Scripture. I agree with Highfield that any theology that abandons its warrant in Scripture cannot be said to be faithful to the message of the Gospel.

I think that Highfield's understanding of the purpose and scope for the preservation of Scripture is quite correct. Not only does Scripture states that it is authoritative in what it teaches about God, what he has done for us, and what God demands from us, but it is also good for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). But very crucial is Highfield's very astute observation that the church did not canonize Scripture for what it says about science, history, or even philosophy; the church canonized Scripture for what it teaches about God (p. 26). I must completely agree with this aspect of Highfield's argument. I wish more people in and outside of theological circles would understand this, as it would save many misguided and fruitless theological debates regarding the relationship between science and faith such as those involving Creation Science and Darwinism.

It is essential to understand Highfield's point of view that in order to do theology one must be on the "inside." One cannot do theology in the sense that Highfield claims to be the traditional view and not be a Christian. The Christian theologian must believe that Scripture is under the providential care of God and that the Holy Spirit has made it possible for us to

understand some of what God wants us to know. Whatever disagreement we may have or difference of interpretation, one cannot approach the Scripture with “suspicion”, but rather, in the confidence that it is God’s Word. “Christian theology begins in faith, not in doubt.” (p. 70)

Having established that the warrant for theological statements should be in Scripture and that Scripture has been preserved by God as a reliable and authoritative witness to the apostolic faith revealed by him, Highfield then shows how theology has been traditionally undertaken. Or in other words, how has the church arrived at theological affirmations based on Scripture. In theology, the church seeks a deeper understanding of its faith, and thus it is Biblical in scope. This does not discount the import and significance of the sciences or even personal experience, but it is not subject to them or uses them as sources. Theology must ultimately address whether the church is proclaiming, teaching and living consistently with the Word of God (p. 54). In addition, theology is also involved in the study of church history, as this reveals the history of the church’s teaching.

Thomas Aquinas argued that one could derive conclusions from certain observed first principles as in the Aristotelian sense of science. These first principles, Aquinas thought, came from the Scriptures and not from intuition (p. 53). Theologians have subjected these conclusions that the church has made over the centuries to careful systematization into doctrines. The church has tended to organize or systematize its doctrines following a rough outline according to affirmations of faith such as the Apostle’s Creed or the Nicene Creed. The first such affirmation states that we believe in one God and thus forms the beginning of many attempts at a Doctrine of God. Highfield intentions are to show what these doctrines have traditionally entailed and thus he begins by surveying the traditional arguments for God’s existence.

Highfield begins by stating that the believer needs no proofs of God's existence. The church assembles to praise God and not to discuss whether he exists (p. 70). According to Highfield the most basic demonstration of God's existence is God's revelation in the Scriptures which ought to have meaning to us in a life that is related to God's life, not just as a philosophical concept of no consequence. Here Highfield also examines atheistic, agnostic and pagan views of the existence of God. It is noteworthy that Highfield points out that holding these views have more than just the sense of having won an argument against believers. They have very distinct existential implications that for most practical purposes those who hold them do not live accordingly. In other words, like so many other people, even believers, these people do not live consistent lives. And if not by their thinking, at least by their actions, they show that they would prefer a world in which God does exist (p. 76). In response to some of these issues the church has formulated some arguments that draw from common human experience to the existence of God. Some of these arguments begin with our intellectual or moral intuition and some from our experience of the physical world. That is, some arguments are *a priori* and others *a posteriori*.

Anselm of Canterbury, building on the foundation laid by Augustine of Hippo formulated the best known *a priori* argument. This is called the Ontological Argument because it seeks to establish God's being from his attributes. Anselm argued that if one could conceive of a being as majestic as God, that his existence is part of this majesty. Existing is greater than not existing. Such that if he does not exist then he is not as great and majestic as one could conceive. Highfield seems to prefer this argument. He claims that God exists because "God cannot not be" (p. 99). I must admit that I too feel drawn to it and Olbricht admitted as much in class; there

seems to be something about it that's compelling. Yet others have thought that this is nothing but a tautology or a circular argument.

Of the best *a posteriori* arguments are Thomas Aquinas' five ways, also called Cosmological arguments. These take observable data from the universe, our everyday experience, to draw the conclusion that there must be a creator. The first way looks at the effects of motion and concludes that there must be an unmoved mover, i.e. God. The second way, looks at the cause and effect relationships and concludes that there must be an ultimate cause, God. The third way argues from the contingency of observable things and argues to a being who is not contingent, namely God. The fourth way speaks of the degrees of perfection that one can observe in things and beings and arrives at the conclusion that there must be a most perfect being, again this is God. In the fifth way Aquinas argues that all things tend toward a goal, or all things have a purpose. From this he argues that it is God who has given this observable *telos*—a purpose or goal, to all things and beings. This is an extremely compelling argument that is still used today by proponents of theism and one that was vigorously attacked and defended during the Enlightenment.

In addition to arguments above, there are arguments for the existence of God based on our experience of moral law. These arguments move from our experience of moral law to a supreme law-giver. Immanuel Kant grounded his claim for the existence of God in such moral argumentation, where he makes the appeal to our moral sense as pointing to the existence of God. This supreme law-giver is there to guarantee that justice is carried out either here or in the life to come. The claim moves from the idea of an objective moral order such as all people finding murder to be wrong, to postulate God as necessary to validate such moral experiential intuition. In the end Highfield argues, the Christian needs not any proofs, for he is grounded on

God's word. It is in God's word that we find who God is and what he is like. To describe what God is like Highfield then moves to an explanation of God's essence and then to that of his attributes.

Traditional theologians have always asserted that God is Triune. That is, "everything God *does* is from the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit" (p. 105). Highfield demonstrates that this teaching can be found in the earliest manuscripts from the Fathers, the creeds and in the Scriptures. Highfield takes some time to highlight these sources and there can be no doubt that it is present there. The question seemed to have been, even at the outset of the Christian movement, how to understand and explain the triunity of God. Consequently there were many that the Church felt had incorrectly understood and interpreted the triune doctrine. In response to people like Socinus, Sabellius, Arius and others, the church came up with formulations that intended to reflect a common and correct understanding of those passages of scripture that clearly reflect a Trinitarian teaching. This intends to highlight the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is one that took some time to develop, but that it nevertheless did not develop from erroneous conceptions to correct ones. Rather, the process was one of clarification for greater understanding. In summary, the traditional teaching on the Trinity affirms that God is one nature and three persons, where the unity and distinctiveness of each person is affirmed with equal force. In this way when we speak of the attributes of God, we do not speak of the attributes of God the Father only; rather we speak of the attributes of the Godhead, which is the Triune God.

According to Highfield, *attribute* is a word that can have subjective connotations. Others such as Barth have preferred the term *perfections*. Nevertheless, Highfield believes it's best to continue to use the term attribute and guard against any subjective overtones (p. 146). Divine attributes are also not the same as the attributes of a thing, for these can be accidental or

essential. And it is not appropriate to speak of God as having accidental attributes. In explaining which attributes to ascribe to God, Highfield develops the arguments of traditional theologians showing that these are to be thought of as those “than which greater cannot be conceived” (p. 149). Anything less perfect than we can conceive cannot be an attribute of God. This echoes the Anselmian ontological formula. We can also not ascribe to God attributes that would limit him, such as space and time. These attributes also do not, or should not, be understood as parts making up a whole. God is not compound, but rather he is said to be Simple, Eternal, Infinite and Unchangeable (p. 150).

Highfield also speaks of the appropriateness of our language to describe God. He speaks of analogy and metaphor as ways of speaking from the known to the unknown or indescribable. Highfield affirms that this is a way in which God can communicate to us who and how he is through revelation. Revelation gives our warrant to associate certain aspects of God with what we can relate to as creatures. Without this warrant we would be talking nonsense about God. According to Highfield, while we can use creature language to describe God, we should not equate the attributes of creatures with those of the creator. While this is obvious, I believe Highfield is setting the stage here for his attack upon those modern theologians who would like to suggest that God has human-like emotions or responses. I think that what Highfield is trying to guard against is the idea that when we speak of human-like attributes for God, that these have a certain correspondence between the way God actually is and the way creatures are. This negation, I believe is a mistake, and I concur with John Sanders when he affirms that, “If God is completely unlike anything in creation then nothing true can be said about God (Sanders, 29). In Jesus, Highfield sees the ultimate analogy between creation and God (p. 147). Yet Jesus is moved emotionally by the death of Lazarus, but according to Highfield we would have to deny

that God (as he really is) is moved in any way, emotionally or otherwise, that correspond to anything Jesus experienced. If there is no correspondence of some kind (which we can describe by analogy or metaphor) then all talk about God is utterly meaningless. I would propose instead that if God really is like “X”, we know something of this because we are like little “x” and such correspondences can be found in Scripture as analogies or metaphors. On the other hand any formulation that states that while we experience God as being like “X”, because there is correspondence with us being little “x”, but yet God is really like “Y” even though we experience him as “X”, seems to be making a distinction without a practical difference. Because if like Highfield suggests, there is no correspondence between creature attributes and God attributes then how do we know God is like “Y”? This should become clearer below as I discuss the impassibility of God.

Highfield enumerates the traditional or classical attributes of God and endeavors to show that these have scriptural warrant. It is also the point and title of his book to show that these attributes ought to move us to a doxological declaration (silence, praise and adoration).

Because of limitations of space, I will focus primarily on the attributes of omniscience (and its relationship to foreknowledge), omnipotence, immutability and impassibility. These are especially interesting because contemporary theologians have come against the traditional understanding of them.

In the traditional understanding, Highfield asserts, God knows all things directly and thoroughly. This knowledge is of great comfort and it gives us another reason to praise him. Because God knows all things he also knows the future exhaustively and completely. Highfield states that knowledge of the future or foreknowledge is a sure sign of divinity and gives several examples (p. 314). Gregory Boyd, however, uses the same examples to give a different

explanation of God's divinity. According to Boyd, God's greatness and divinity do not necessarily rest upon him "seeing" the future, but rather upon bringing to pass that which he said he would bring to fruition (Boyd, 31). It is Boyd's position, and that of Open Theists, that God leaves some of the future open. Boyd contends that this is not a philosophical position; rather, he states, the Bible portrays God as not knowing certain future events (Boyd, 120). This portrayal has been given theological interpretation by open theists. They say that by its very nature some of the future does not exist even to God. In the same way that it is logically impossible for an omnipotent God to make a square circle, it is logically impossible to know all the future—some of it is contingent. The traditional doctrine of omnipotence clearly concedes that God cannot do that which is logically impossible (p. 350). Not that this is a limitation of his power, but rather it is an absurd formulation. The question would then seem to hinge upon whether or not the future contains events that cannot logically exist because they are subject to contingency—not that God is not omnipotent or omniscient. There is simply nothing there for God to "see."

Most of us would be willing to accept that God never changes his moral character or his nature: he is always good, always just, always fair, always loving. But some of us would have trouble believing that God never changes at all. That is, and again speaking in creature language, God never changes his mind, never changes his plans, reacts to a contingency, or actually responds to prayer. In spite of the fact that the Bible portrays God doing exactly those things, Highfield makes it plainly clear that "I am not limiting God's immutability to his ethical character" (p. 358). The Bible explicitly shows God changing his will in response to a new development such as the repentance of the citizens of Nineveh at the preaching of Jonah or in response to prayer. His merciful and loving nature changes not, for he changed his will precisely in keeping with his loving nature. Sanders points out that it is precisely that Jonah knows that

God is constant in his mercy and quick to change his mind if the situation changes, that he refuses to preach to Nineveh (Sanders, 76). If we are talking, as Highfield contends, of Biblical warrant for our doctrine, should we not pay closer attention to these and other passages? Again, as I pointed out above, if what Scripture tells us is only spoken of God relatively—as Augustine thought—not according to any accident of God, how are we to understand the divine? If we understand the essence by the accidents, yet we don't perceive any accidents of God as they really are only relative speech about them, then how do we know the essence—what are we talking about? If not even God's revelation of himself in the Scriptures contains a description of the accidents of God in a way we can understand them, how do we project to an essence that is wholly other? Origen states that these are written figuratively and in a human way (p. 360). I presume that Origen means that God really doesn't change his mind or that he really doesn't relent of certain actions, God's essence is really not like this. But the real question is how he knows this in light of the Scripture passages that clearly show God doing precisely this. There is no doubt that denying the traditional doctrine of immutability has an effect on other divine attributes, but I would suggest that any ripple effect down the attribute list is perhaps due to their questionable derivation from Scripture.

As I suspected, and Highfield confirms, impassibility and immutability are closely linked. He states that the traditional doctrine does not say that God has no heart, no feelings of love, wrath, joy or jealousy, but rather that nothing outside of God can change his "emotional state." Highfield grants here that we are stretching the limits of what we can say about God with our language and I think he's right (p. 375). Highfield grants that we must not replace the God of Scripture with a passionless, unfeeling and cold abstraction. In developing his defense of the traditional doctrine, Highfield responds to contemporary critics who claim that this doctrine is

the result of replacing the Biblical doctrines with Greek metaphysics. Since the Greek gods would experience the same emotions as humans, perhaps heightened, it was considered improper of God to have such emotions as sexual lust, or murderous jealousy. One can understand that those that critique the impassibility of God are not advocating that he should be like the Greek gods. But the main point is the exposition that God cannot suffer because in so doing he loses something of himself and God cannot lose something because he is complete and perfect (p. 385-386). Highfield also states that on the cross, the Father did not suffer nor the divine nature of the Son, but only Jesus' humanity (p. 386). But it seems to me that Highfield goes to extreme lengths to explain this doctrine which ultimately seems to leave us wanting. I am not convinced that the love of each person of the trinity for each other explains Jesus' suffering, but not the Father's. An alternative explanation here would be that if anything, all the persons of the Godhead suffer "in some way" when the Son suffers in his flesh. I say "in some way" because as I proposed above, we as little "x" can only dimly see or speak of what the real "X" might be and for that we use analogy and metaphor. Therefore, I do not say that God suffers the way we do, but I claim that there must be some correspondence between the way we experience suffering and emotion and the way God does. Otherwise, all revelation in Scripture makes no sense at all.

Conclusion

I began this review by stating that some of us had only casually heard of the traditional doctrine of God and have not studied it in detail as Highfield has. I understand that the traditional doctrine attempts to provide a coherent doctrine with Scriptural warrant. After having read Highfield I have a new appreciation for this task and have noticed the enormity of the endeavor. Yet I must say that some of the arguments were hard to follow Biblically (and this

may not be Highfield's doing). They seem to depart from the goal of scriptural warrant and wonder off into theology's traditions throughout the ages. What if Aquinas was wrong, for example? Then the whole tapestry of a seemingly coherent doctrine begins to unravel. Having said this I think there is much truth in the traditional doctrines of the Church, but I make no secret of the fact that I am sympathetic to Open Theism. Synthesizing both to achieve a better and greater understanding of the faith is perhaps a task worth pursuing.

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