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Levering and Vanhoozers' "Was the reformation a mistake?: Why catholic doctrine is not unbiblical" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Levering, M., & Vanhoozer, K. J. (2017). *Was the reformation a mistake?: Why catholic doctrine is not unbiblical*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 240 pp. \$16.99. ISBN 9780310530718

2017 has been marked by festivities, lectures, and publications marking the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's 95 theses. This short volume invites Catholic theologian Matthew Levering to respond to the Reformation's claims that Catholic doctrine is not true to the biblical text. In the Introduction, Levering sets the stage by defining what he terms "biblically warranted modes of biblical reasoning", which are "communal and liturgical modes of biblical reasoning ... necessary for appreciating Catholic doctrinal judgments" (p. 29). Levering then tackles nine key theological themes contested by the Reformers: scripture, Mary, Eucharist, sacraments, monasticism, justification and merit, purgatory, saints, and the papacy. The book concludes with a "mere Protestant" response by Kevin Vanhoozer.

Each chapter follows the same layout: a summary of Luther's objections to the Catholic doctrine, followed by Levering's biblical reflection, where he presents his reasoning for the veracity of the Catholic understanding of the doctrine. Levering should be commended for grounding his response in Scripture (save for the few times he cites apocryphal sources), and his reflections are a good summary of modern Catholic beliefs on doctrines most Protestants take issue with. However, this reviewer found the framework wanting. First of all, Levering often never refers directly to Luther's concerns in his reflection, and so the two parts of the chapters often feel disconnected from each other. In fact, the summaries of Luther's concerns could be completely removed from many of the chapters with no impact on Levering's subsequent reflection. Secondly, Luther's concerns reflect Catholic doctrine and practice at a particular time and place, whereas Levering utilizes the whole of Catholic tradition, including traditions and doctrinal statements that have been modified since Luther's time. Thus, Levering's responses, although grounded in biblical reasoning, verge on anachronism.

Vanhoozer's response is charitable but spirited. He focuses his critique on Levering's biblical reasoning, arguing that although both he and Levering agree that proper biblical interpretation involves the church, Levering goes a step too far by ascribing

interpretive authority to the church, and in particular the Catholic Church (p. 207). In addition, Vanhoozer takes umbrage with Levering's typological exegesis, using the chapter on Mary as case study to examine Levering's exegetical method.

The book serves as a solid, but brief introduction to nine areas where the divide between Protestants and Catholics remain. Recommended for Bible college and seminary libraries.

Reviewer

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