



Geisler, Norman L.

***Systematic Theology*, 4 vols.**

Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2002-05. Pp. 627 + 720 + 624 + 784. Hardcovers. \$164.96.

Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Years ago, as a young Christian, I used to frequent Christian chat rooms on America Online. I'd discuss and debate theology with people from all theological stripes, making plenty of enemies, but some friends as well, in the process. One friend was a gentleman named Steve Kinney who told me at the time that he was an adjunct professor of philosophy at Biola University in La Mirada, CA. I was never able to confirm this information, and thinking back on the matter, I have my doubts that he was being completely honest. But I mention him because at the time he had talked up Norman Geisler as one of the world's leading philosophers/apologists/theologians.

With this endorsement in mind I immediately went out and purchased a number of Geisler's publications. *Christian Apologetics*; *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*; *A Popular Survey of the Old Testament*; and *Chosen But Free* were among the first purchases. While I was less than impressed with his theological work, *Chosen But Free*, I found his apologetic work to be competent, even compelling, so in early 2006 I purchased his recently completed *Systematic Theology* set. I was urged to hold off on purchasing this because once the set was complete it would be sold at a cheaper price. I heeded this advice and ended up paying \$75 for my four volumes.

My distaste for Geisler's theological writing should have raised a red flag in making this purchase, but a professor from Biola recommended it, and he couldn't be wrong! Well, he was wrong, and I wasted \$75. Despite arranging his material according to the classical loci communes, i.e., prolegomena, theology proper & creation, soteriology & hamartiology, ecclesiology & eschatology, Geisler's *ST* isn't actually systematic theology; it's a reception history of various propositions. What do I mean? Good question. Basically Geisler takes a theological proposition, e.g., God is impassible, and he proceeds to quote passages of Scripture, patristic Christian writers, medieval Christian writers, Reformation and post-Reformation era Christian writers, and at times modern Christian writers on the subject. The problem is that such an approach is super-selective and what we end up getting are soundbites that are ultimately unhelpful. This then is not a systematic theology, but a reference guide, or dictionary of sorts.

For certain subjects (such as miracles) Geisler lists objections along with responses to the objections. These are probably the most helpful portions of this set since Geisler shines more in philosophical matters (he's thoroughly Thomistic) than he does in matters theological (since his is a strange mishmash of Calvinism, Arminianism, and some other isms of his own concocting). He certainly seems more at home arguing against Hume or Kant than he does explaining divine aseity, spiritual gifts, or even the doctrine of the Trinity (which receives a scant 43 pages [2:269-312] in a volume that's over 700 pages; the first 400+ pages of which are theology proper!). But theology isn't the only weak spot in this set; Geisler's exegesis is also less than impressive at times (e.g., when he argues that only the Apostles spoke in tongues on the day of Pentecost, 4:662-63).

Geisler is unabashedly a premillennial dispensationalist; inerrantist; cessationist; and Thomistic philosopher which shines through on every page of this set. Some readers will be turned off by the way in which Geisler argues certain points (e.g., the Day Age theory) by skimming through alternative positions (although to his credit he does mention them) and presenting flimsy arguments in favor of his position in the process of declaring it correct, but for the audience this set is intended for (i.e., extremely conservative evangelical Christians), it's more likely that he'll find agreement. And while I'd consider myself conservative, and there's plenty I agree with in this set, I can't agree with the way it's put together. Calling a set of books a systematic theology implies that theology is being done, and unfortunately, we get very little of that. For this reason I'd recommend almost any set or even single volume over Geisler's (e.g., Finney; Hodge; Grudem; Jenson; Pannenberg; et al.). But I would like to end this review on a positive note: these books sure look nice on the shelf.