



**McCormack, Bruce L., ed.**

***Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives***

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

*Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* gathers together a number of essays that were first delivered as lectures in 2005 at the 11<sup>th</sup> Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland. If I'm not mistaken, all of those lectures have been revised for publication in this volume. The contributors are a diverse bunch that represents a fairly broad spectrum of beliefs in evangelicalism. Bruce McCormack has tentatively placed Paul Helm, D. A. Carson, Oliver Crisp, Donald Macleod, and John Webster on the "classical [theism] end of the spectrum," with N. T. Wright, Henri Blocher, Pierre Berthoud, Stephen Williams, and himself "as belonging to the 'progressive' end in their willingness to pose questions to concepts of divine timelessness, impassibility, and so forth..." (10)

The book is divided into four parts: 1) New Testament and Early Christian Origins of the Doctrine of God, 2) Historical Perspective, 3) Theological Perspectives, 4) Practical Theology Perspectives, with an introductory chapter (a sermon by David F. Wright). The division is completely disproportionate though, with the first and second parts containing only two chapters apiece, while part four contains only one, and part three contains five.

N. T. Wright opens the volume by suggesting that Jews weren't so much concerned with God's attributes as they were with God's actions expressed in Israel's story, the climactic scene of which was Jesus' appearance as Israel's Messiah. This claim about the Jewish lack of concern about

God's attributes often repeated by Biblical scholars but I've always found it to be a bit of a red herring. If Jews weren't concerned with God's attributes then one wonders why they spent so much time writing about them in Scripture! The fact is that God's acts in history have been the impetus for even the most speculative theology of divine attributes. The Church has long recognized a distinction between *οικονομία* (economy) and *θεολογία* (theology) where the *θεολογία* is revealed to us through the *οικονομία*. The various contributors throughout this volume who highlight some attribute of God's or another do so precisely by appealing to his acts in history. Berthoud takes the reader on an exegetical-theological journey through God's acts in Israel's exodus in order to show us God's compassion; and this in contrast to the notions of compassion held in Buddhism and Islam. Stephen Williams cannot even begin to discuss God's sovereignty without first describing God as "the ever-present speaker and *actor*, director of the ins and outs of history" in the Old Testament (169, emphasis mine).

But this volume contains more than a discussion of divine attributes. Oliver Crisp has an enlightening essay on the pitfalls Jonathan Edwards' trinitarian theology along with a defense of its ultimate orthodoxy. Carson's survey of God's wrath in connection to his justice and mercy is a fine example of straightforward Biblical theology; no muss, no fuss, no frills. Blocher offers an excellent summary and critique of Moltmann and Jüngel's theology of the crucified God. Helm and McCormack both bring Barth into conversation with other theologians; Helm, relying heavily on McCormack, critiques Barth's understanding of Calvin on the *Logos asarkos*. McCormack brings Barth to bear on the debate over open theism, citing that most open theists are closer to classical theists than they might like to admit and in turn are operating according to the same categories. Barth on the other hand, while not being completely removed from classical theism in my opinion, offers a way forward in the discussion by creating completely new categories.

The various voices throughout this volume show that evangelical theology is alive and kicking and looking for new ways to affirm in some cases, and reform in others, the ancient Christian teaching on the nature and attributes of God. As such, evangelical orthodoxy appears to be in a state of flux, and for some this might be considered a good thing. I'll leave that to the individual reader to decide (my opinion is that such flux is undesirable). The contributors to this volume write cogently, even if at times the writing seems a bit stale (e.g., John Webster's "Life in and of Himself: Reflections on God's Aseity" [107-24]), and most students who have a decent acquaintance with systematic theology will find this volume fairly easy to digest. While I believe that this is a solid set of essays I wouldn't consider it necessary reading; most of the topics covered here will be found in most decent systematic theology sets, and there usually discussed in more depth.