

BOOK REVIEW

of

James Montgomery Boice,
Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive & Readable Theology,
InterVarsity Press, 1986.

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This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

In the Preface to this book, James Montgomery Boice writes: “Not often do I, as an author, sense an area in which no book seems to exist and for which one should be written. But the area covered by this volume is an exception, in my judgment. For years I had looked for a work that could be given to a person (particularly a new Christian) who is alert and questioning and who could profit from a comprehensive but readable overview of the Christian faith, a basic theology from A to Z. But I could not find anything that was quite what I had in mind and, thus, determined that I should attempt to write it myself.” After expressing some reservations in writing such a work, and delaying his attempt, with some apologies for its inherent limitations, he did at last write it. It originally appeared in four separate books, published as they were completed, and was then combined into a single volume. The four books somewhat follow the four books of John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, however, Boice’s volume clearly deviates significantly from Calvin’s and modernizes and broadens the content. In my opinion, there is no comparable book by any other author. Perhaps the reason why is the very nature of such a broad sweeping attempt to present the entirety of the Christian faith. Few would be tempted to even try it. It takes a man such as Boice, scholarly, pastoral, widely published, speaker at many Bible conferences, with a passion to present Christianity at a level that most can understand, to have the preparation to take on such a task. In my opinion, this is a book that should be much more widely read and referenced than what it appears to be. It should not only be read and referred to, but referred to often! It provides a map of the terrain that helps keep everything in perspective.

The volume is organized into four books, with four parts in each book, with a few chapters in each part: each book has 18 chapters for a total of 72 chapters. The volume is over 700 pages in length. Since there is such a large number of chapters, only the book and part titles will be listed here. Book 1 is titled *The Sovereign God* and the four Parts in Book 1 are as follows: *The Knowledge of God*, *The Word of God*, *The Attributes of God*, and *God’s Creation*. Book 2 is titled *God the Redeemer* and the four Parts in Book 2 are as follows: *The Fall of the Race, Law and Grace*, *The Person of Christ*, and *The Work of Christ*. Book 3 is titled *Awakening to God* and the four Parts in Book 3 are as follows: *The Spirit of God*, *How God Saves Sinners*, *The Life of the Christian*, and *The Work of God*. Book 4 is titled *God and History* and the four Parts in Book 4 are as follows: *Time and History*, *The Church of God*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *The End of History*.

Book 1 covers basic doctrine about God, as the four part titles suggest, and focuses upon God the Father. In Part I, there are two chapters on the knowledge of God. How do we know God? What are the primary means by which we may grow in our knowledge of God? These are, of course, very basic questions that are very relevant to the Christian faith. Jesus told us that knowing God *is* life eternal. Boice first discusses two common means by which many think they can know God and dismisses them: “The rationalistic approach is impersonal and amoral. The emotionalistic approach is without content, transient and also often immoral.” Boice explains that knowing God “means being made alive by God”, and that this “takes place only where there is also knowledge of ourselves in our deep spiritual need and where there is an accompanying acceptance of God’s gracious provision for our need through the work of Christ”. This is basic Calvinism, which is Boice’s approach throughout, but he presents it in a very winsome way for those without that background.

In Part II of Book 1, containing six chapters, the objective means of knowing God through His revelation of Himself in the Bible is presented. This part of Book 1 presents the *sola scriptura* doctrine of the Reformation: the Bible alone is the Word of God. This doctrine does not at all take away from the personal experience of worship, prayer, and the sense of the presence of God with us. Nor does it minimize the work of the Holy Spirit within us. What it does teach is that our personal experiences must be in accord with, and corrected by, what is taught in the Bible. It also teaches that while confessions of faith, decisions of church councils, Bible commentaries, systematic theologies, and other works of men may well be helpful and edifying to us and should not be ignored, the ultimate authority when it comes to all questions and doctrine in the Christian Faith is the Bible. This position is not held by all who name themselves Christians, and therefore Boice devotes six chapters to defending this position. He covers the authority of the Scriptures, how we may be confident in that authority, how we should read and interpret the Bible, and modern criticisms of this position.

In Part III of Book 1, containing six chapters, the attributes of God are presented and discussed. There are profound implications flowing from Part II of Book 1, the Bible alone is the Word of God. Some of those implications have to do with who God is. We live in a world of many religions. Those religions believe and teach very different things about the nature of the spiritual world and about the attributes of spiritual beings. Some believe in many gods. Some don’t believe that there is a supreme being at all, while perhaps still holding to many gods. Some are monotheistic, but have very different concepts about who or what their god may be. Some base their understanding of god to a significant extent upon their own personal experience derived from prayer or perceived spiritual operations taking place in their lives. If the Bible alone is the Word of God, is His revelation of Himself, and is the objective means of knowing God, then, of course, we turn to the Bible to discover who God is and what His attributes are. This is not mere academic, intellectual material. It tells us about the one true God with whom we

have to do. Its importance could hardly be over estimated. It is by studying the Bible that we learn of God's self existence (we are not self existent), of God's self sufficiency (we are not self sufficient), of God's eternity (we are mortal and finite), of God's sovereignty, omniscience, omnipotence, etc. We also learn of His holiness and righteousness and love. This is the God that we need to have in mind when we pray or worship. We should always be on our guard against false gods.

In Part IV of Book 1, containing four chapters, the relationship between God and His creation is presented and discussed. God is presented as the creator of man, the natural world, and the spiritual world. And He is presented as exercising His providence over it all. God not only created, but is still actively involved in His creation. These teachings, derived, of course, from the Bible, have profound implications for our understanding of God, ourselves, and the world around us.

Book 2 covers basic doctrine about the Fall and Redemption, as the four part titles suggest, and focuses upon God the Son. In Part I, there are three chapters on the Fall of the human race. This Part begins with the Fall, and is concerned with what is sometimes referred to as the doctrine of man. In the previous Book, Part IV, it was presented that God created man in God's own image. What is discussed here is the nature of man. The perceived nature of man varies widely, depending on one's philosophy or religion. Christianity teaches that while man is created in God's image, the most important aspect of the nature of man beyond his creation in the image of God is that man is a fallen being. The fallen-ness of man has much to say about the fallen-ness of the world around us, the broken relationship with God, and the need for redemption. An important doctrine that flows from this concerns the bondage of the will. There is a sense in which a person's will is free, in that there are no physical constraints preventing one from making a decision that they deem correct. But in another important sense there are constraints, be they emotional, spiritual, or moral, that prevent us from making correct decisions. We make decisions that are guided by our nature, and our nature is fallen. Our fallen nature is what produces the bondage of the will when it comes to spiritual things.

In Part II of Book 2, containing five chapters, the Biblical teaching on Law and Grace are presented and discussed. Before we can hear the good news, we must first hear the bad news. The bad news is that we are fallen creatures as discussed in Part I, that God is righteous as revealed in His Law and we are not righteous, and that due to our fallen nature we cannot in our selves merit anything in the sight of God. Most of this Part focuses on the Law of God and the Wrath of God, with a special focus on the Ten Commandments. But in the last chapter of this Part, Boice briefly presents that people under the Law (Old Testament believers) were saved by Grace the same as Christians are today. Boice apparently did not want to leave this Part on a negative and depressive note.

In Part III of Book 2, containing three chapters, the person of Jesus Christ is presented and discussed. This Part develops the deity of Jesus Christ, that He is fully God. It also develops the full humanity of Jesus Christ, that He is fully man. Debates about the person of Jesus Christ arose very early in the Christian Church. It is very important that we fully understand that Jesus was both God and man and why this is important. To understand the work of Christ (the next Part), it is essential to understand the person of Christ. The mystery of the incarnation is perhaps difficult to fully grasp, but an understanding of what Christ accomplished on our behalf depends on it.

In Part IV of Book 2, containing seven chapters, the work of Christ is developed. This may be the most difficult Part in the entire volume to fully grasp. And yet it is the very heart of Christianity. God Himself took a considerable amount of time developing these truths, in the sense of revealing them to us. The long centuries of Israel under the Law, with the detailed sacrificial system, the history of failure on the part of Israel to be faithful to God, the long list of prophets developing just how our relationship with God is established, and, of course, the numerous prophecies about the coming Messiah finally fulfilled in Jesus Christ, were preparatory for us to grasp the work of Christ. Foreign sounding words are abundant here, that we may never have heard before in any other context. The reason why is simple, the work of Christ is unique, so unique in fact, that analogies elsewhere in our experience are difficult to find. These words include propitiation, redemption, and justification. To some this may seem academic, but these are the themes upon which hymns are based, true worship can derive, and glory is given to our Redeemer and King.

Book 3 covers basic doctrine about how we can respond to the message of redemption, and focuses upon God the Holy Spirit. In Part I, there are three chapters on the Spirit of God. This Part introduces the Holy Spirit, and how He is so vital to our personal relationship to God. Boice describes the distinct personality of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity, what His work is, and how He is instrumental in bringing about our union with Jesus Christ.

In Part II of Book 3, containing seven chapters, the means by which God saves sinners is developed. In the first chapter of this Part, Boice gives the overview: "In the final pattern we have God's foreknowledge, predestination, then his effectual call of us, regeneration, faith and repentance, justification, sanctification and glorification." Part II explains these Biblical teachings. We see things from our own perspective, but it glorifies God and increases our faith as we grow to a more complete understanding of these teachings. For example, "While we must believe on Jesus as the divine Savior to become Christians, we believe because God himself has taken the initiative to plant his divine life within us."

In Part III of Book 3, containing six chapters, how the Holy Spirit finds expression within us in the Christian life is explained. This volume up to this point can be mostly understood in an intellectual way: Book 1 on God the Father, Book 2 on God the Son, and even the first two Parts of this Book if not personally applied. However, Part III of Book 3 discusses actually living the Christian life, and includes self denial, the discipline of prayer, knowing the will of God and the discipline that that requires, the hard work of Bible study, and the difficult tasks of serving God and others. However, this Part also includes a discussion of the wonderful freedom to be found in Jesus Christ.

In Part IV of Book 3, containing two chapters, how the Holy Spirit applies the work of Jesus Christ to us is presented. These two chapters discuss the doctrines of predestination and perseverance: that justification and sanctification are the work of God within us. These doctrines are not universally held by all Christians, but they are Biblical and assurance of salvation can likely

not be had without them. It is clear that we are individually responsible for our actions, but it is also clear that to be rightly related to God through Jesus Christ is something so wonderful that it is truly beyond our ability to accomplish and must be initiated and accomplished by God Himself. And if it is truly the work of God and not that of ourselves, then it can not be lost and perseverance is assured.

The first three Books are about God: God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are primarily doctrinal, about God and how we relate to Him. Book 4 covers how these doctrines are carried out in time, in history, how these things are practically operating now in the present, and what is to come. In Part I, there are three chapters on the big picture of time and history. In Part I the Christian view of history is presented. History is progressively moving forward according to God's plan, there is purpose to it all, God created it all, God's providence is behind it all, and most importantly God is carrying out His plan of redemption, and it will all lead to a final consummation. The focal point of history is Jesus Christ: God, in the fullness of time, brought forth His Son to accomplish redemption for all that belong to Him. However, Boice also adds to his understanding of the Biblical doctrine of man, more fully developed in Part I of Book 2, in this Part, perhaps because it didn't quite fit in the earlier three Books, but also because it has to do with the unfolding of time. It has to do with the radically different view of human nature taught in the Bible compared to that held by the surrounding culture.

In Part II of Book 4, containing nine chapters, the Church is presented and discussed in some detail. What makes a Church of Jesus Christ? How can we recognize a true Church? What makes for true worship in the Church? What is the function of the Church? How is the Church to be organized? What is the mission of the Church? All of the answers to these questions have very important implications for the life of the Church, are clearly very practical, have implications for those looking for a church with which to be involved, and are far from being merely academic. Some of the important teachings in this Part are that the Church of Jesus Christ is one Church, the Church is not an organization (although individual churches are organized), God's people need one another and should learn from one another, we should demonstrate love-unity within the Church, the Church is to demonstrate joy, holiness, truth, mission, unity, and love, and true worship.

In Part III of Book 4, containing four chapters, the culture of the world and the culture of the Church are contrasted and compared. Using the terminology of Augustine, Boice refers to the two cultures in terms of two cities, the secular city and God's city, as used in *The City of God*. How is the Church of Jesus Christ to properly relate to the secular culture around us? Ultimately, this leads to a study of what we call in America "church and state."

In Part IV of Book 4, containing two chapters, Boice comes to the end of his volume and presents a discussion of the end of history. How will the world in its present form come to an end? As presented in Part I of this Book, the Christian view of history is that God is in control, that history has a purpose, and God is carrying out His plan of redemption. Implied in this view is that the history of the world as we know it will come to an end, its purpose having been served. The Bible is clear on this, that at the end Jesus Christ will return and take His rightful place as King of all things, and the secular culture will come to a close. Then, in the final chapter, Boice spells out the ultimate hope of all Christians when we will be home at last, forever present with the Lord!