

Book Reviews

Klaus Nürnberger. *Faith in Christ Today: Invitation to Systematic Theology. 2 Volumes.* Dartford: Xlibris, 2016. 478 pp.

This two-volume systematic theology of the South African theologian Klaus Nürnberger provides an easily accessible and vivid introduction into theology that is characterized by his own interdisciplinary work and a concern to make theology accessible to every interested reader. The author's style serves his goal of providing an invitation to theological thinking: simple language, a clear structure, numerous definitions, summaries, and study questions facilitate easy reading and understanding. Nürnberger also uses diagrams sporadically to illustrate complex topics such as the Trinity (2/303–04) or eschatology (2/491, 513–17), thereby facilitating an easier access to difficult theological questions. His hermeneutical method offers an invitation to theological reflection: Nürnberger's "down-to-earth-approach" (xxi) begins with the experiences of the reader and links these to fundamental theological questions. Nürnberger's hermeneutical approach is oriented to lay readers in the church who want to understand the content of faith. Thus, he aims to provide a "theology for non-theologians" (xiv), which helps them understand and live in alignment with Christian faith (xv). Argumentation and diction suggest that he writes for believing and churchly readers with a strong faith in the Word of God.

According to his experience-based theology, Nürnberger prefaces his dogmatics with a defense of theology against the complaint: "We have the Bible, why theology?" (1/1–30). Nürnberger defines theology as "reflection of what we believe" (1/4). Its foundation and starting point is the Bible itself. Therefore, the task of systematic theology is to "conceptualise the Word of God" as an actualization of the Bible (1/9). With this defense in place, Nürnberger sketches out his hermeneutical approach, which is expanded at the beginning of Volume 2. As he puts theology in conversation with the present experiences of the reader, Nürnberger develops an "experiential realism" that corresponds to the methods of modern science and technology (2/51). "Experiential ... confines to actual experiences" (1/18) and "realism"

describes the “imperfect way of experiences” (1/19). This approach therefore always leads to particular and non-universal statements about God (2/54). Because of God’s self-disclosure, theology refers to transcendental realities in immanent processes (1/21), combining existential and phenomenological methods (1/22). With this sketch of his theological program in place, Volume 1 focuses on the doctrine of Scripture (“The Living Word of God”) and ecclesiology (“At Home in God’s Fellowship”). Volume 2 treats the doctrine of God and creation, anthropology, Christology, the Trinity, and eschatology.

Nürnberg’s presumptions about the reader’s experience shape Volume 1. He presumes a lived familiarity with divine revelation, Scripture, and the church as a home and space of the Word of God. Contrarily, Nürnberg does not presume any interest upon his reader in other fundamental or more academic theological questions: clarifications on his concept of reason, religion, for example. Thus, a decisive shortcoming is the missing explanation of his understanding of experience which is central to his theological approach. For historically-critically trained readers, Nürnberg’s argumentation on the doctrine of Scripture appears unusual: Starting from the assumption of God’s revelation in Scripture, he illustrates historical contingency of the biblical texts (1/37–40). The following explanations of ecclesiology are based on the doctrine of Scripture: Nürnberg understands the church as an ‘expression’ of the Word of God and unfolds its relation to the society and the unity of the church from this perspective. The comprehensive discussions on the Word of God reflect not only the supposed reading interest, but also the broad biblical knowledge of the author¹.

Volume 2 reflects besides the sketched experience-based approach the author’s interest in developing theological ideas in dialogue, not only with personal experience, but also with the sciences. Nürnberg repeatedly argues how biblically based theological understanding coincides with empirically experienced and scientifically ascertained insights. Especially in the field of neuroscience, Nürnberg sees a central connection to theology, discussed not only in anthropology and the doctrine of sin, but also in the doctrine of God in the section “The Basis of God Consciousness in our Brains” (2/28–44). The relation of scientific insights to the doctrine of creation, presented in the section “The Empirical Reality of God’s Creation” (2/85–100), remains surprisingly underdeveloped. Nürnberg concentrates on creation and entropy, which he recalls in his chapter on eschatology (“Entropy and Eschatology,” 2/460–64). Nürnberg’s reflections on the understanding of

1 See Nürnberg, Klaus. 2002. *Theology of the Biblical Witness*. Münster; London: LIT; 2004. *Biblical Theology in Outline*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.

history and modernity reflect his reading of social science theories and their empiric data (2/331–63). Altogether, the second volume focuses on the extensive discussion of Nürnberger with natural and social sciences studies².

The volumes conclude with the chapter “Meet the Author” (2/519–63). This rather unusual ending to a systematic-theological volume is nevertheless consistent with Nürnberger’s theological theories and offers a helpful contextualization of his explicitly particular and non-universal theological thinking.

Nürnberger’s work shines in its accessibility, thus fulfilling its namesake as an *invitation* to theology for laity. The volumes are without any doubt highly recommended for interested laypeople and also suitable for the use in ecclesial groups. Nürnberger’s experience and belief-based approach, to begin with widespread beliefs on Scripture and the revelation of God in order to discuss them from a theological-scientific perspective, is a very important attempt to bridge the gap between scientific theology and congregational piety. That these volumes find their origin in Nürnberger’s undergraduate theology teaching also shows the necessity of this way of argumentation in theological education. This objective, although rather unusual for dogmatic theologies, cannot be highlighted enough. The fact that the interests of a scientifically trained reader may not be satisfied in the same way is, while not surprising, still disappointing. For those readers, the innovative relations of scientific knowledge with theological *topoi* may be of special interest (although Nürnberger discusses this more comprehensively in his other volumes mentioned above). Unfortunately, the hermeneutics of ‘experiential realism,’ which also arise out of interdisciplinary discussion and are of special interest for theologians, remain diffuse and their methodical reconstruction is left as an open task for the reader. The explicitly particular and non-universal way of thinking, due to Nürnberger’s experience-based approach, is worthy of special consideration and further thought. Despite the fact that it sometimes leads to surprising or irritating results, reading the work in light of its invitational aim allows for a hearty acknowledgement of Nürnberger’s achievement of a consistent theological approach.

Frederike van Oortschot
 Heidelberg University (Heidelberg, D)
 frederike.vanoorschot@oek.uni-heidelberg.de

2 Nürnberger, Klaus. 2011. *Regaining Sanity for the Earth: Why Science Needs ‘Best Faith’ to Be Responsible, Why Faith Needs ‘Best Science’ to Be Credible*. London: Xlibris; 2013. *Informed by Science, Involved by Christ: How Science Can Update, Enrich, and Empower the Christian Faith*. London: Xlibris.