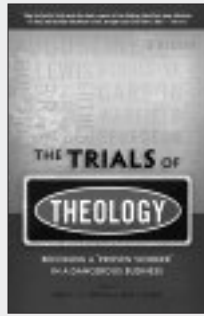


The trials of theology

REVIEWER | SAM FRENEY



The Trials of Theology

Edited by Andrew Cameron
and Brian Rosner
Christian Focus,
Ross-shire, 2009, 192pp.

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I never thought I'd go to theological college. In truth, I fancied the idea of studying theology as an abstract intellectual exercise, but had little inclination to put that learning to any practical use. I thought this a rather poor reason to go. Biblical scholarship for its own sake seemed to me to be a self-serving trap that was best avoided. This fear of the 'ivory tower' is one of the struggles and temptations that can accompany studying the things of God that is detailed in *The Trials of Theology*. This collection of wisdom, edited by Andrew Cameron and Brian Rosner, is a reader intended for those engaged in theological education: short pieces from Christians from both the past (Augustine, Luther, Spurgeon, Warfield, Bonhoeffer, and CS Lewis) and the present (DA Carson, Carl Trueman, Gerald Bray, Dennis Hollinger, and John Woodhouse).

There's lots to like about this collection. The wisdom born of experience from these godly men gave me frequent pause for thought about my own life and ministry, and recurrent prompts to repentance and prayer. In fact, prayer was repeatedly urged: "we grow, we wax mighty, we prevail in private prayer" (Spurgeon, 41). Godliness in both study and broader life is identified by many as paramount, neither to be set against being a student nor to be neglected due to the aspirations or other struggles of student life (Warfield, p. 52; Woodhouse, p. 105).

Augustine's fervent clarity on the great pastoral responsibility on Christian teachers and the grave need for adequate preparation is stirring. It's easy to feel discouraged at the many and varied pitfalls, but even with these there is joy. The great dangers are only so great because it is the enormous privilege of the theological student to spend such a great quantity of time being encompassed by the word of God (Warfield, p. 57)! I was greatly encouraged by the reminder of "the greatness of your calling: the immensity of the task before you and the infinitude of the resources at your disposal" (Warfield, p. 64).

This book is also pleasantly easy to read. Older authors are ably translated into contemporary English (not the difficult 19th century prose of many other theological readers). The editors do their job well; they provide appropriate introductions, explanation of terms, and context, then largely get out of the way to let the contributors speak, appearing only at times to extend a principle to the specifics of theological education.

The Trials of Theology is clearly aimed at those who are current students. This is reflected in the choice of historical pieces, such as Augustine's plea to *actually* study for a time to prepare properly for the great burden of pastoral ministry. Spurgeon, Luther, and Warfield all write as teachers addressing students, speaking particularly of the challenges and joys of student life. In addition, if memory serves correctly, Woodhouse's piece is *very* close to the orientation-week chapel sermon for first-year students.

Despite this particularity, I found the collection to speak just as clearly to me, a former student (albeit a relatively recent one). Pastors, 'professional theologians',

Bible teachers of various stripes: we need to remain students of the word. We continue to gain the experience that makes us learned, and drives us back to understand God's word (Luther, p. 26). We need to pursue godliness along with learning, to be mastered by the text of Scripture (Carson, p. 117), to continue to strive to "know the unknowable and describe the indescribable" (Rosner, p. 191). The psychological desires, temptations to pride, workaholicism, or idleness, although different in detail, are no different in character. In this way, much of the material here will be edifying for any who are involved in some form of teaching ministry, and valuable for any who wish to support those in such ministries.

The intended focus on (current) students, outlined clearly by the editors in the introduction and conclusion, seems to blur somewhat in the closing chapters. The papers regarding trials of particular disciplines (ethics, systematics, history) are less about the dangers inherent in the practice of studying them and more about the challenges faced by the discipline more broadly. Further, the authors here appear to speak to those who are professionals and specialists in these fields, in contrast to the tone and level of writing. As a recent student and current pastor these are fascinating conversations to overhear, but I feel I am interloping at this point.

This is a great book for those tempted to lose the wood for the trees. Amidst the theological debates, language disputes, technical terms, and wildly varying gifts of those around, I found it a great spur to humility, to fall back from pride and legalism to the grace of Jesus. To seek to be like a great student of the Bible, who "was a scholarly man, yet he was monopolized by the one Book, and was made mighty by it" (Spurgeon, p. 39). **B**