Paul L. Allen


In this book Paul Allen dedicates himself to the important but complicated task of clarifying theological method. It originated from a graduate course largely based on Lonergan’s classic, *Method in Theology*, which offers an excellent, but rather abstract explanatory scheme to account for theological reasoning. It was apparent to Allen that ‘some greater sense of the historical parameters around which theological method is circumscribed’ was needed (vii). Therefore he sets out to survey and analyze the history of Christian reflection as it presents itself in the thought of key figures which illustrate various ways of doing theology. The result is a presentation of the history of Christian theology, including the theology of Paul, the patristic era, Augustine, the medieval era, the Reformation, early modern-, modern- and contemporary times, which focuses on the question _how_ theological claims are made rather than on the content of these claims. Of course, method and content are intertwined, and therefore Allen has to present an outline of the theology of his key figures in order to elucidate their procedures. There is an apparent advantage to this way of presenting method in theology, since it is not abstract and teaches by showing. The obvious disadvantage is that the student or reader should have considerable acquaintance with the history of theology before the method of theology can be discussed. Allen surely masters his object of study well, which is an admirable achievement, but unfolds it in a demanding book which resists simplifications and mainly functions as a supplement to Lonergan’s work.

Questions of method in theology have to deal with the use of philosophy, the weight attached to various sources (Bible, experience, tradition and reason), the general theological task (apologetic or speculative for example) and the procedure that one follows. With regard to method, four principal notions are important to every theologian. Method itself as a set of procedures used in reasoning; Revelation, understood one way or another as Gods activity; Hermeneutics as letting oneself be shaped by Gods activity as mediated or reported by the biblical texts; Tradition as the beliefs or public knowledge which enable us to approach revelation conceptually. As reported above, Allen does not elaborate on these notions abstractly, but wants to show how various theologians related to them in doing theology their way.

Fundamental to the theology of Paul is his revelatory experience of Christ, which is illuminated and measured by the scriptural text. “What we have in Paul is therefore a method of one who is working in terms of the practice of scriptural interpretation and foundational categorization” (47). Over
subsequent centuries this method is expanded. Irenaeus offers a differentiation between foundational categories and the formulation of doctrines either based on scriptural reading or derived from other sources. Origen adds the allegorical explanation of biblical texts and their interpretation on a literal, moral and spiritual level, as well as a distinction between theological doctrines that pertain to the rule of faith and speculative ideas. Athanasius’ method is determined by his refutation of heretical theologies and an engagement in dialectical argument in order to arrive at some foundational stances that allow for doctrinal novelties against the heretics. Because the fathers of the Church offered explanations for their faith, their theology is more doctrinal than the theology of Paul, but this is mainly a matter of their reconciling of sources and certainly not the result of purely intellectual ambitions or philosophical interests.

In *De Doctrina Christiana* Augustine made an important contribution to the subject of theological method. In order to understand God and his love we should not only understand scripture, but ourselves as well and this directs our attention both to the text and the person who is interpreting it. In this way another layer is added to theological method since it is not just concerned with correct interpretations, explanations and arguments, but also involves a re-direction of the interpreter’s orientation in life.

Medieval theology is represented by the theologies of pseudo-Dionysius, Anselm and Thomas Aquinas. It is important “to be aware of the different conceptions of theological method in medieval theology” (116), but generally spoken medieval theology introduces methodological novelties because of new philosophical tools, a broad use of dialectic and a wide variety of theological tasks to be performed. Luther, Melanchthon and Calvin embraced a methodology of ‘sola scriptura’, but their respective theologies are guided by different aims and procedures nevertheless. In what the author calls early modern theologies, of which Schleiermacher and Newman are described as samples, the questions concerning method are deeply involved in discussions about the meaning and role of history. Modern theology, basically the theology of the twentieth century, centers around the question of correlation or anti-correlation, which either leads to a strong methodical awareness (as in Tillich) or to a strong sense of theological identity (as in Barth), which seem to be mutually exclusive. In contemporary theology, however, as it is articulated in Radical Orthodoxy, post-liberalism, liberation theologies and the theology of Joseph Ratzinger, theological reflection seems to overcome earlier naive correlationism and naive traditionalism.

Textbooks on theological method are scarce and this book does a good job to fill a gap. It describes theological method by showing the various ways in which theology is done. This procedure guarantees a close connection between the