

Book review

Gayle Gerber Koontz

The Dogmatic Imagination: The Dynamics of Christian Belief, by A. James Reimer. Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 2003.

Faith is more like the dynamics of playing Scrabble than like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, James Reimer proposes in a brief new book for adults in the church. While structure, luck, skill, and intelligence are involved in both games, in Scrabble a new design emerges with every playing, and players are dependent on each other's moves while remaining independent and free.

The Scrabble metaphor illumines Reimer's description of biblical interpretation and theological reflection as the "eternal word becoming flesh and flesh becoming word," an ongoing process of a "divine weaving together of many truths and ways of speaking" which will be finished only at the end of time (8). And the metaphor guides his succinct, lively exploration of traditional Christian beliefs throughout the book.

It takes enormous discipline for a theologian aware of the complexities surrounding major issues in Christian faith to write only three pages on each. Reimer has done so with care and theological excellence.

The Dogmatic Imagination, clearly written and quickly read, attempts to bring basic Christian doctrines back to life for educated adults in the church. Short chapters deal with the role of Scripture, personal experience, and the Holy Spirit in Christian thought; with the language of God as father; with Jesus, creation, the fall, God's providence, salvation, baptism, prayer, Jesus' love ethic,

sexuality, God's judgment, and life everlasting. While this list may seem like a catechism for new believers, the book is directed toward Mennonites who have been members of the church for some time. However, the book may have value for initiating intellectually-oriented seekers and could also be useful to those returning to the church after absenting themselves for a while.

I first read *The Dogmatic Imagination* while in Guatemala, a setting that accented the Canadian, middle-class character of Reimer's writing. Many Canadian and U.S. Mennonites will connect with a theological work sprinkled with illustrations from North Atlantic politics, philosophy, arts, and life. But the fact that the book appeals to such readers may mean that it is not suitable for Christians from quite different cultural or economic settings.

While a strength of Reimer's book is his ability to draw striking links between his cultural context and Christian theology, he is perhaps not always adequately critical of his own cultural biases. For example, as irritating as Reimer may find "Jesus wejus" phrases, "(as in 'Jesus we jus[t] ask you to . . .')," this style of prayer is not always connected with a "gimme gimme" theology as Reimer implies when he describes it as "a kind of groveling plea for one more thing from a busy deity" (61). Blanket criticism of a style of piety reflects and reinforces social prejudice in the church, rather than assisting us with appropriate theological discrimination.

The topics Reimer explores are critical ones for thoughtful Christians in North America. It takes enormous discipline for a theologian aware of the complexities surrounding major issues in Christian faith to write only three pages on each. Reimer has done so engagingly and pointedly, with care and theological excellence.

I would like to see some chapters strengthened. For example, in the sexuality chapter it would be helpful to distinguish *sexuality*, *sex*, and *sexual intercourse*, and to include more positive biblical attitudes toward sexuality. But in this work as a whole, Reimer has surely offered the church a gift to enrich theological conversation in a variety of congregational settings.

In his chapter on Jesus, Reimer uses the image of a symphony orchestra. He likens God to a conductor, concertmaster, and composer of a set score, and we are instrumentalists. But this image undermines the Scrabble metaphor with which Reimer began. Perhaps we should compare theological reflection to a jazz or bluegrass session instead. Perhaps God is more like a dynamic melody which we receive and recognize and upon which we improvise, as does Reimer, in this book, to the glory of God.

About the reviewer

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