

Powell, Samuel M. *Discovering Our Christian Faith: An Introduction to Theology*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2008. 348 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0834123540.

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Powell's book is an important addition to the rather scant list of resources for teaching theology to college students and laity from a historic Wesleyan perspective. He is upfront about his stance as one who stands "within the Wesleyan tradition of Protestant Christianity." His goal is to describe "normative Christian faith," but working consciously from a defined perspective. He clearly understands that for two hundred years Wesleyans have likely learned their theology best by singing it, so he sets the theological agenda for each chapter by beginning with a Wesley hymn. At the same time, he confesses that he is not attempting to write a comprehensive Wesleyan apologetic that takes into account multiple Wesleyan voices: "This volume presents only one of those voices and does not assume to be the only voice of the tradition."

While not unique to his book, but Powell's step of presenting the Christian faith by following the order of the biblical narrative is not typical of theological surveys. This is not the same as "biblical theology" of an earlier era, however, for he proceeds simultaneously to interface the biblical material with the classical doctrines of the orthodox Christian faith. To a large extent, theology in the modern era (nineteenth century onward) has been characterized by a "hermeneutic of suspicion"—that is, at best with a healthy dose of skepticism. This type of theologizing has not served the church well, and Powell is well aware that one can be a careful and analytic scholar of the tradition without tingeing the narrative with doubt and doubt-filled assertions. To this end, he asserts, "Theology is not simply to provide information but is instead to be an instrument in the transformation of our minds as we seek to have the same mind that was in Jesus Christ" (11). In accord with this, he is not shy to say that Christian theology should convey a normative content. In this sense, the book is not an introduction to the bare facts of Christian theological assertions, but rather intends "to introduce readers to the Christian faith" (12).

Powell's approach requires patience on the part of the reader because some doctrines, such as creation and sin (following the biblical sequence), are partially introduced in early chapters, only to be finally fleshed out as

doctrinal formulations in subsequent chapters. The reader looking for capsule statements will be frustrated. The advantage of Powell's approach is that this approach is that it is much more historically and biblically honest. This is actually how the church has worked out its theology through the centuries.

Powell's intended audience is basically students and thoughtful laity, an attempt to introduce them formally to the Christian faith. In some ways his methodology will likely prove a challenge to students and thoughtful laity alike. This does not mean that he should not have taken this approach, but it does imply that the reader should be aware that a "patience pill" might be required to get the absolute most out of the book. The intended audience will likely be pleased to see that the author has foregone footnotes. He is not trying to impress a scholarly guild of professionals. Rather, he seeks to guide those with "faith seeking understanding"—a time-honored approach in historic Christianity.

The intended audience should profit greatly from the inclusion of "summary statements" at the end of each chapter that will inform a re-reading of the chapter to gain clarity of insight. In addition, there are additional "questions for reflection" that could well serve as discussion topics for highly intentional small groups willing to take on the task of delving deeply into the Christian faith in a formal manner. Indeed, at the beginning of each chapter, one will find a set of listed "objectives" as well as "key words to understand" and "questions to consider as you read." These are superb pedagogical devices that make this book ideal for studying together in a Wesleyan "accountability group."

The only suggestion that might strengthen the pedagogical value of this book is offered with a slight hesitation. The author advises the reader that there are key words to understand, the definitions for which can be discerned (one would assume) by a careful reading of the chapter. But what if one needs that definition later? Well, perhaps one could go to the rather lengthy index. I decided to try that. I chose the word "freedom," a rather important concept in Wesleyan theology. The index lists no less than thirteen references throughout the book, but it does not indicate that the term is listed on page 65 as a key word for Chapter Three: "Human Beings Made by God." In my estimation, it would help the reader if the page numbers where the definitions of these key words appear were lighted in the index or if there was a glossary for the book, since the reading audience is not apt to have in their own memory a working theological vocabulary.

This is an impressive teaching tool for the church, and I recommend it without hesitation.