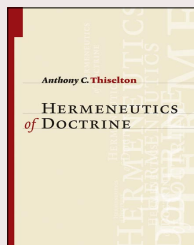


Interactions between *hermeneutics* and *doctrine*

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Review Title:

 Interactions between *hermeneutics* and *doctrine*
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Thiselton is a highly esteemed scholar, a world-leading authority on biblical and philosophical hermeneutics, and truly an expert guide to theories of interpretation. His book, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, is, in the words of Rowan Williams (Archbishop of Canterbury), 'by any standard a major work, deeply necessary in a climate where confusion and indifference about doctrine too often prevail'. In describing the work, N.T. Wright's (Bishop of Durham) assessment of it as 'magisterial, comprehensive ... massively learned and massively relevant, deeply faithful to the Christian tradition yet deeply refreshing in seeing everything from new angles', is a very accurate description. Full of traditional thinking, yet also full of modern and the most recently developed ideas and methods of interpreting, the book is highly recommended for scholars and post-graduate students.

Thiselton's purpose with *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* is to establish a more significant interaction between *hermeneutics* and *doctrine* in order to contribute, at least to some extent, in rescuing Christian doctrine from its existing marginalised role and abstraction from everyday life. To him, there is more to the challenge than viewing doctrine as a theoretical system of truths that have little or no impact on our daily Christian lives, or even seeing doctrine as an instrument for distinguishing between true and false beliefs. He is convinced that a thorough understanding of biblical and philosophical hermeneutics, and then specifically in its relation to doctrine, have *far higher expectations* of how the study of biblical texts can have not only a *lasting influence* but also a *transforming effect* on the *lives* of Christian believers. The challenge is to move from *abstract theory* to *life-related hermeneutics*. Isolating doctrine from *life* can only have devastating and destructive effects in the life and faith of a Christian. Thiselton's aim, therefore, is to explain the hermeneutical methods and points of departure needed and suitable to resource Christian doctrine. In this regard, he makes use of the works of Moltmann, Pannenberg, Gadamer, Ricoeur and Wittgenstein, in particular, and uses, to a lesser extent, works by other thinkers, wherever he finds their writings useful to facilitate his own views or to develop further insight. He is, however, *open-minded* enough to avoid moving in the direction of belonging to a *school* of thinking.

Thiselton emphasises the *communal nature of Christian doctrine*, and to him it is ever-important to deviate from a mistaken reduction of corporate doctrine to individual-centered belief. He sees the emergence of individualism, and individual-centered epistemology, as the primary cause of the marginalisation of doctrine. According to Thiselton, it means that for individualism the supposed basis of doctrine lies in a personal belief, and that comes at the expense then of the communal nature of doctrine and at the expense of the ecclesiology. The *hermeneutics of doctrine* is needed as response to the *serious vacuum* caused by individualism. Thiselton emphasises that all the *mainline traditions* of the Christian church understand doctrine in *communal* terms. In his views of hermeneutics as *communal understanding*, he finds support in the works of prominent scholars such as Gadamer, Ricoeur and Pannenberg – in opposition to what he sees as Descartes' timeless and individual-centered rationalism. He points out that some *post-modern* writers replace epistemology with some kind of a social or ecclesial self-construction.

Apart from his very complete and comprehensive analysing and explaining in dealing with the subject of the hermeneutics of doctrine as a whole, it has to be stressed that for Thiselton Biblical hermeneutics nevertheless always has to take into account the *relation* between *text*, *community*, and *tradition*.

His book consists of 22 chapters, divided into three parts. *Part I* (in 6 chapters) deals with the *reasons to explore the hermeneutics of doctrine*, and, with the focus mainly on method, attempts to explain the perspectives and the methods that belong to a hermeneutical approach. *Part II* (in two chapters) *replies to possible objections* to a hermeneutic of doctrine – and then from the standpoint of the claims of coherence and system. The author is strongly convinced of the necessity for *system*, however, with certain qualifications. He stresses the importance of *coherence* as a criterion of truth. *Part III* (in fourteen chapters) deals with *major themes in Christian doctrine*, such as creation, being human and the image of God, the fall and collective sin, hermeneutics and linguistic currencies



of the theologies of the cross, hermeneutical approaches to the Christology and the doctrine of God as Trinity, the eschatology and the ultimate and definitive hermeneutical horizon of meaning. In this part specific Christian doctrines are considered in the light of *hermeneutical starting points*, *hermeneutical resources*, and *hermeneutical currencies*, reflecting the *varying hermeneutical questions* and *sensitivities* that each individual doctrine uncovers. Thiselton does not only work on the wide variety of *hermeneutical methods*, but he finds it also important to explain the methods in applying them to specific Christian doctrines. In the fourteen chapters of *Part III*, Thiselton specifically works with two different kinds of horizons of understanding, namely:

1. Initial *pre-understandings* on the part of the researchers, those who seek to understand, which involves an attempt to identify points of engagement between interpreter and the subject of research.
2. Attempting to find that which the '*otherness*' of the doctrinal subject matter demands as a *horizon within which* its claims will be heard without distortion and without the interpreter imposing his or her understanding and convictions upon it.

Getting involved in this book is indeed a wonderful journey and experience. The book, without a doubt, makes a valuable contribution to the study of hermeneutics and Christian doctrine.

