



Nürnberg, Klaus

Faith in Christ Today. Invitation to Systematic Theology.

Volume I (Life in the Presence of God) *and*

Volume II (Involved in God's Project).

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Reviewed by Prof Dirkie Smit

Klaus Nürnberg needs no introduction. He has been a doyen of Christian theology for many believers, students, ministers and admirers. Over many decades he contributed prolifically to things theological in South African circles – as a leading voice on ethical questions during dark years of conflict and struggle, from the economy to political debates; on hermeneutics and the nature of doing theology; on faith facing contemporary challenges, from cultural power to scientific influences; yet always also on systematic theological issues, and in particular the teaching of the faith to students, from his earliest work, including a one-volume systematic theology in Afrikaans already in the 1970s.

Now he has published the ripened fruit of many years in a two-volume systematic theology full of passion and persuasive power – although he concludes his more than thousand pages by saying ‘the publication of this work is not yet the end’! For him this means that his word is not intended to be the last word, instead, his words are only invitations to others, to read, think, question, engage, differ, continue the discussions.

It is therefore very intentional that the subtitle describes the project as an ‘invitation’ to systematic theology. He wants the readers – and he carefully reflects on his intended readers and all possible groups and individuals who may heed his invitation and join the conversation – to benefit from his wide-ranging knowledge, but not to be overawed by unnecessary information and detail, and to join the conversation from where they are, with what they know, what they think, what they experience and feel. He

describes this approach as experiential-realist, which is how he wants to do theology and how he thinks theology should be done.

He is therefore continuously concerned with ‘keeping it simple without making it simplistic.’ He achieves this with an array of choices and techniques, all together making the two-volume project quite unique and remarkable.

He hardly makes use of footnotes and references, and only on occasions refers readers to his own works, where he dealt in more detail with specific issues. He almost never mentions any other theologians. This is not a dialogue with other theologians and theologies, at least not as far as the readers are concerned (of course it may be in his own mind), but a dialogue with the subject matter, and his views and questions and opinions about the subject matter – which makes it in fact one long monologue and makes reading the books an engagement with the experience and insight of Klaus Nürnberger himself.

It fully fits this genre when he concludes the second volume with a long final autobiographical chapter, called ‘meeting the author,’ in which he describes his life’s journey, of which these books are the result, as well as the contexts in which his thoughts developed and his opinions were formed. This is followed with a long and detailed list of all his publications.

For these reasons, both volumes also have glossaries and lists of terms used, but they do not include any names of people, since there are no other people mentioned in this genre. Instead, he is extremely aware of his possible readers – he addresses them personally, asks them questions, attempts to motivate and inspire them – in both volumes he summarises his ‘message in a nutshell’ – and is clearly interested in empowering them without overwhelming them. He is thinking of theological students, but also interested believers, potential ministers and actual ministers. He clearly wants to assure them that living the faith in Christ within the Christian community is a worthwhile option, even ‘today’ – as the title claims. He therefore provides introductions, summaries, appendices, all kinds of formal assistance for all kinds of potential readers.

In spite of all these attempts to keep it simple, it is most certainly not simplistic. He draws on his scholarly work and his intellectual contributions

of many years to develop a sustained and reflective theological position, one that developed in an evolutionary way, he explains, not only over three thousand years in the tradition but also in his own career, over many decades of committed study and teaching and writing.

In Volume I he moves from the Bible and the question why theology is necessary for a life of faith to notions of the living Word of God and flowing from that approach to issues of the church, of the life of faith not only in this long and evolving tradition but also in this dynamic, historical and open community.

In Volume II he deals with our notions of the God behind this tradition and community. Important for him (for the life of faith) are both what he calls the benevolent intentionality and the comprehensive vision of this God. Under these rubrics, he deals with most of the conventional themes of systematic theology – Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, and soteriology – but kept together in one experiential-realist argument of his own, with careful attention to potential readers, to be invited into the conversation, not to be overwhelmed by authority and information. He concludes these chapters in Volume II with reflections on God beyond space and time, discussing eschatology and eternal life.

The end result is impressive. It can only be received with well-deserved gratitude and thanks. It is an enormous achievement – the achievement of a life dedicated to faith in Jesus Christ, as he himself explains. In a time when fewer people are in the habit of reading two-volume books with more than a thousand pages, this project at least does everything in its power to make it interesting, easy enough, and existentially worthwhile to whoever will follow this exciting and informative invitation.