
Was the Reformation a Mistake? Why Catholic Doctrine Is Not Biblical. By Matthew Levering, with Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017. 240 pp. Paper, \$16.99.

This book was “commissioned by Zondervan for the five-hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses (p. 16).” Its intended audience is Bible-believing Christians who “continue to resonate with the concerns that have divided Protestant and Catholic Christians for five hundred years” and “deem the disputed Catholic doctrines to be biblically mistaken” (p. 29). It aims to “stimulate positive ecumenical conversation, in the context of the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation” (p. 32).

Matthew Levering holds the James N. and Mary D. Perry, Jr., Chair of Theology at Mundelein Seminary, University of Saint Mary of the Lake, in Mundelein, Illinois. He is the author or editor of more than forty books, including a book defending the Catholic teaching of Mary’s bodily assumption into heaven. Kevin Vanhoozer is a noted evangelical author and research professor of systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Both men are members of Evangelicals and Catholics Together.

As the title of this book implies, *Was the Reformation a Mistake?* is primarily a book in defense of Catholic doctrine. The reply by Vanhoozer is only forty-one pages. After a twenty-page introduction, there are chapters on “nine issues raised by Luther at the outset of the Reformation that continue to divide Catholics and Protestants” (p. 16). These are Scripture, Mary, the Eucharist, the Seven Sacraments, Monasticism, Justification and Merit, Purgatory, Saints, and the Papacy. After Levering’s brief conclusion and Vanhoozer’s “mere Protestant response” (which also has a conclusion), there are subject and Scripture indexes. The book is enhanced by about 400 footnotes.

Each chapter begins with a brief introduction that includes reference to “the specific paragraphs of the 1997 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that treat the topic of the chapter,” with occasional references to “other relevant documents of the Catholic Church” (p. 21). Each introduction is followed by “a thumbnail sketch of Luther’s concerns about a specific issue” to “summarize in Luther’s own words why he rejected the Catholic positions on these nine issues” (p. 16). However, the book is not “a dialogue between *Luther* and Catholic

theology” (p. 16). Luther is being used to “raise the main concerns that Protestants have about Catholic doctrine” (p. 16) because he “nicely articulates doctrinal concerns that Protestants today share” (p. 17). Luther’s writings are employed “simply as a convenient way of presenting the nine areas of difference in the context of the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation” (p. 34). Each chapter continues and concludes with Biblical reflections “addressing the specific area of concern identified in the first section of the chapter” (p. 17). The reflections “seek to address the doctrinal concerns of the Reformation” by offering the author’s “own contemporary reflection on Scripture aimed at conveying some Biblical grounds for why Catholics hold the doctrinal positions” (p. 17) that they do. But, as Levering emphasizes, they “are meant to be a preliminary sketch of Biblical reasoning rather than to prove the clear presence of Catholic doctrines in Scripture” (p. 33). He reiterates that the reflections “are not meant to stand as demonstrative evidence for the Catholic position” (p. 32). Naturally, though, in each chapter he arrives “at a conclusion favorable to the Catholic position” (p. 33). Levering seems to be going out of his way in his introduction to tell the reader that none of the book’s chapters make “a fully developed argument” (p. 33) for the doctrine at issue. He does the same thing in his conclusion, almost apologizing for the lack of space to “display the fuller context of Catholic biblical reasoning” (p. 187) and “advance full-scale arguments in favor of Catholic doctrinal judgments” (p. 189).

Regarding the title of the book, Levering holds that “the Reformers made mistakes, but that they chose to be reformers was not a mistake” (p. 31). The Reformation cannot be dismissed as a “mistake,” even if “it mistakenly deemed some Catholic doctrines to be unbiblical and church-dividing” (p. 31). He believes that “Luther and Catholics (then and now) are largely playing on the same side” because they agree on certain issues like the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, the Ascension, “the priority of the grace of the Holy Spirit, the authority of Scripture, the centrality of faith, and many other such things” (p. 34).

Although it is certainly true that Catholics and Protestants agree on certain fundamentals of the faith, I would take issue with Levering’s inclusion of grace, Scripture, faith, and “many other such things,” and even with the Catholic conception of the Atonement.

As one would expect, Levering makes the case for the Catholic Church as the authoritative interpreter of Scripture, the exaltation of Mary, the celebration of the Mass, the efficacy of the Sacraments, monastic communities, justification by an infused righteousness, the existence of purgatory, praying to saints, and the authority of the papacy.

Vanhoozer's Protestant response is not a point-by-point refutation of the Catholic doctrine presented in each of Levering's chapters. It is more of a reflection than a refutation. Because he concentrates on Levering's "underlying assumptions and overall approach" (p. 201), Vanhoozer limits his response to what Levering says in the introduction and first chapter on Scripture in order to "evaluate his use of Scripture in arguing for a Catholic understanding of Mary in chapter 2" (p. 202).

Vanhoozer begins by calling Levering "Saint Matthew" in the "Pauline sense of a fellow believing Christian, a person set apart through faith in Christ" (p. 191). His response concentrates on what he takes "to be the three distinguishing marks of Levering's proposal: its charming *catholic spirit*, daring *Protestant strategy*, yet enduring *Roman substance*" (p. 193).

Vanhoozer applauds Levering's "catholic spirit"—his "admirable openness to friendship with and learning from Christians in other traditions than his own" (p. 198). But in the end he remains unconvinced that Levering's positions are Biblical options for Evangelicals. Vanhoozer considers Levering to be "a biblically literate Catholic thinker" (p. 209), but rejects as unbiblical "the idea that interpretive authority has been vouchsafed to the Roman Catholic Church only" (p. 205). And although Vanhoozer welcomes "Levering's exercises in biblical reasoning," he questions "some of the conclusions he draws regarding the place of the church in this redemptive history" (p. 218).

In spite of this book's promotion of Catholic doctrine and the weak response to it by Vanhoozer, I must still recommend to mature Protestants, Evangelicals, and fundamentalists *Was the Reformation a Mistake?* because of Levering's desperate attempt, in the words of Vanhoozer, "to show that the very same doctrines that the Reformers dismissed as unbiblical do indeed have biblical legs to stand on" (p. 193). It is important for those who are sound in the faith to study

the words and works of the opponents of real Biblical Christianity in order to better be able to defend the true faith.

Laurence M. Vance
Vance Publications
Orlando, FL

A Defense of Free Grace Theology: With Respect to Saving Faith, Perseverance, and Assurance. Edited by Fred Chay. The Woodlands, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2017. 628 pp. Paper, \$23.99.

This book, edited by Fred Chay, is, for the most part, an apologetic against Reformed soteriology and Wayne Grudem's "*Free Grace Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel*." It has 628 pages, a Scripture index, but no subject index.

Chay wrote four chapters; Ken Wilson, one; Paul Tanner, one; David Anderson, five; and Joseph Dillow, thirteen (which makes up more than half the book).

Chay is so gracious toward Grudem in the first chapter that he seems to be suggesting that Grudem's Lordship Salvation evangelistic message may be sufficient to save. Several times he asks whether Grudem believes that the Free Grace message is a saving one (pp. 12, 16). Not once does he ask whether Grudem's message is a saving message. Why not? Does he believe it is? In the last paragraph in Chap. 1, Chay writes, "The authors of this book agree with Dr. Grudem that regarding this topic, as viewed from both sides, a '*family intervention*' is needed" (p. 30, emphasis added). Is Grudem part of the family of believers? Has he ever believed in Christ alone, or has his belief always been the addition of works or obedience as per Lordship dogma? Chay suggests that all the authors of *A Defense of Free Grace Theology* agree that he is a brother. But why? Is there any indication that Grudem ever believed the promise of life (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47)? Nowhere in the book do any of the authors provide any such evidence. Evidently the authors think that Grudem's Lordship Salvation message is inaccurate but clear enough to be salvific. That, it seems to me, is a denial of the Free Grace message, since that message is the only saving message.