

## Book Reviews

### Jesus Christ KING of the Church

James Moir Porteous

James Begg Society 1999

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Ffordd Garnedd, Y Felinheli, Gwynedd

North Wales, LL56 4QY.

*Reviewed by Tony Horne.*

The latest publication from the James Begg Society is undoubtedly its most ambitious so far. A truly handsome volume carrying no dust jacket but with the well known painting of "The Ordination of Elders" imprinted on the cover surface. Strangely enough, the reviewer could find no mention of the printer - ? Nevertheless, the price of **£10.99** (inclusive of postage) is a modest sum for such a fine production even apart from any consideration of the contents.

The book is a work of reference and not something that can be read easily from cover to cover at one sitting. Its value lies in its in-depth study of church government and its conclusion, at every stage of the enquiry, that Presbyterianism is the only form of government sanctioned by Holy Scripture. Regarding the relative importance of the subject, the author says:

*"Christian men are too apt to put questions of church government aside, and to reckon these subordinate, if not wholly needless... Can any revealed truth be unimportant? Some truths alone are absolutely essential for salvation; but every revealed truth is essential to some end" (p.2).*

The author, James Moir Porteous, was a minister in the Free Church of Scotland in the last century, ministering for thirteen years in a parish in the southwest of Scotland and ten years in Edinburgh. It was shortly after he commenced his ministry that the denomination awarded a prize for the best essay on Presbyterian order and government and that prize went to Porteous.

The first part of the book is taken up with enunciating and proving fifteen statements of presbyterian polity, the first and pre-eminent one being that **THE ONLY KING AND**

**HEAD OF THE CHURCH IS THE LORD JESUS CHRIST.** Porteous then goes on to establish the basic elements of presbyterian church government. For instance, referring to the early New Testament church he says:

*"The Church of Christ then was not composed of detached portions, which had no kind of connection with each other, and no government in common. They were all united, not merely by professing the same faith, and by esteeming each other in love, but by the eternal bond of a general government. This is the model presented, to which the Church of every age and place is bound to seek conformity" (p. 105). And again:*

*"Every congregation is equal in power, the smallest with the largest. No authority is given to any one to command another. But there is warrant in Scripture for the rule that what belongs to all, should be participated in by all. Consequently, as ordinary members are subject to their representative elders; so congregations are subject to their representative elders, associated together in the name and by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ" (p.191).*

The second part of the book is taken up with refuting Independency, Prelacy, Popery and other forms of church government. It is during this discussion that he raises such interesting issues as the call to the ministry, who should preach, the role of elders and deacons, who are (or were) apostles, evangelists, prophets, priests and bishops, and whether it is permissible for women to enter the office of the ministry.

One contentious area of presbyterian polity has always been its insistence upon the necessity of graded courts - kirk session, presbytery, synod and general assembly to govern the church and administer discipline. In defence of this system Porteous states:

*"... judgments may and do fall upon offending individuals, and yet a course of discipline is persevered in as absolutely necessary. Hence, a superior tribunal is required for the supervision and reclamation of congregations. Strength and energy sufficient for the prevention and suppression of*



*such evils are most important, and are supplied in representative courts. Every reason that may be urged why a believer should submit to a particular church, requires that the particular church should submit to the whole Church. No obligation can rest short of this"* (p. 193). With this he contrasts Independency:

*"Independency degenerates into, either absolutism in the pastor, tyranny in the deacons, or anarchy and continual schism amongst the people. Of this examples are not wanting"* (p. 193-4). He postulates the case of an aggrieved member or minister of a local congregation and says:

*"Individual cases do arise when a member or minister feels and declares that, by local judges, he has been grossly misunderstood, maligned, and injured. But there is no higher jurisdiction to which he can appeal. The advice of a neighbouring congregation is not likely to have weight, and is not sought. Consequently, the tie must either be broken between that individual minister or member and the congregation and district, or he remains an injured man to his dying day"* (p. 192). He then cites a case affecting a whole congregation:

*"A congregation, it may be, departs from the faith, the great body of the members are contaminated. Who shall call them to account? Or, if so, what power exists to pass censure?"*

*Is it so that our Lord has appointed the exercise of discipline for the reclamation of individuals, and none for offending congregations? The evil spreads"* (p.192).

Two further comments may be apposite. Firstly, it is perhaps significant that, as originally published, the work was in three parts but only the first two have been reprinted. Admittedly, the original work bore a different title - THE GOVERNMENT OF THE KINGDOM OF CHRIST: AN INQUIRY AS TO THE SCRIPTURAL, INVINCIBLE, AND HISTORICAL POSITION OF PRESBYTERY- and the reasons for the omission of the third part are well justified, yet readers of this *Journal* may perhaps question the wisdom of omitting any portion of an author's work in the light of the controversy occasioned by the Banner of Truth edition of *The Sovereignty of God* by A W Pink.

Secondly, it could be argued that, because Porteous was a minister in the Free Church of Scotland and schooled in the best traditions of presbyterianism, he is writing from a position of prejudice. For any reader harbouring suspicions of this nature, a useful exercise would be to compare Porteous with a modern objective study such as that undertaken by John Hooper on a related topic: *Biblical Church Unity* (K&M Books, 1998).

The work is marred by a number of typographical errors - the reviewer found a dozen or so and these have been referred to the Publishers.

All-in-all Porteous' book is a presbyterian goldmine. It will prove of immense value to those entering the Christian ministry but also to all who would have in their hands a well reasoned justification of Biblical church government. An excellent reference work and well worth the small outlay.

## The Extent of the Atonement. A Dilemma for Reformed Theology from Calvin to the Consensus (1536-1675)

G. Michael Thomas

Paternoster Publishing 1997

277 pages, paper

Reviewed by Rev. Ronald Hanko

The consensus referred to in the title of this book is the Second Helvetic Confession, one of the clearest and most consistent expositions of the doctrines of grace ever produced. The book, then, is an historical survey of the doctrine of the atonement from Calvin through to the great period of Reformed orthodoxy that produced the Canons of Dort and the Westminster Confession of Faith. As such it is not without value.

One wearies, however, of the seemingly endless number of books on the doctrine of the atonement, all of which, in one way or another seem bent on proving that the doctrine of limited or particular atonement is not Biblically or traditionally a part of Reformed theology. From that point of view this book is just another of the same.

In fact, the book is as much a repudiation of the Reformed doctrine of predestination as of the doctrine of limited atonement. This, of course, is not surprising in that the two doctrines are inextricably related so that they stand or fall together.



Indeed, the purpose of the author, which does not come to light until the very last paragraph of the book, involves the doctrine of predestination more than the doctrine of the atonement. He pleads for a reworking of the doctrine of predestination, apparently along Barthian lines: "The present study . . . proposes that an attempt such as Barth's to find a new way of understanding predestination deserves careful consideration by all who claim to stand in the Reformed tradition" (p. 253).

Thus he speaks of the atonement as being "shackled" by particular predestinarianism (p. 241) and says that "predestinarian logic could, and perhaps had to, lead away from the initial Reformation proclamation of grace" (p. 228). This, too, is not surprising. It has always been the doctrine of predestination which has borne the brunt of the attack against gracious salvation. This is the reason, for example, that the Canons of Dort, the original "Five Points of Calvinism," treat the doctrine of predestination first. It was that doctrine especially to which the Arminians objected.

The author, attempting to prove "the Reformed inability to come to an agreed position on the extent of the atonement" and "the inconsistency of the doctrine of predestination with its other concerns," sometimes presents a slanted view of things. He suggests, for example, that the conclusions of the Synod of Dort were ambiguous and plays up the weaknesses of some of the delegates, particularly those from Bremen and England by way of undermining the strong position of Dort on predestination and the atonement.

Thus, too, he glosses over the fact that the Canons present one of the strongest statements regarding limited atonement to be found in any of the Reformed confessions: "It was the will of God, that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby he confirmed the new covenant, should *effectually* redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language, all those, *and those only*, who were from eternity chosen to salvation, and given Him by the Father" (II, 8 - emphases mine). This is not ambiguous.

There is even a definite bias shown in the way that Reformed orthodoxy is described over against Arminianism and Amyraldianism, though Thomas himself does not adopt any of these positions. Reformed orthodoxy is invariably described as rigid,

scholastic, and rationalistic, and the Canons of Dort as full of cracks (p. 152). In contrast, John Cameron, the Amyraldians and the theology of the Saumur school are described as "markedly original" (p. 180), "daring" (p. 197), "brave" (p. 241) and "uncompromising" (p. 189).

Zanchius' doctrine of predestination, he says, "was constructed on the basis of his doctrine of God and of Aristotelian concepts of end, cause and effect," and that "the doctrine of God itself was shaped according to the axioms of Aristotelian philosophy, mediated through the theology of Thomas Aquinas" (p. 99). Zanchius, accordingly, has the "dubious distinction" (p. 99) of being the first defender of the doctrine of limited atonement.

John Cameron, on the other hand, makes a "consistent effort to root the universal and conditional elements (of the atonement) in the nature of God, so tending to put the predestinating will of God into the background" (p. 181). And Amyraut himself comes "closer to a Biblical approach than does his opponents" (p. 203), his theology marking "a break with the scholastic logic of the past" (p. 204).

Thomas, along with many others (Clifford, Daniel, Kendall) adamantly refuses to admit the possibility that there is positive development and progress in the history of doctrines, and that the work of Beza, Zanchius, Dort, Owen and Westminster represent such progress. This bias mars the book throughout.

All this is not to say that the book is without value. There is very much interesting and valuable historical material in the book. This reviewer was especially struck by the consistency and Biblicity of the views of Beza and Zanchius as well as by the weakness of Bullinger. The section on Amyraldianism was also informative and valuable. Nevertheless, the book is part of the continuing attack on the Biblical and Reformed doctrines of sovereign unconditional predestination and a particular, effective atonement.

There is also one minor complaint that must be made concerning the format of the book. It is irritating in the extreme to have the footnotes printed at the end of the chapters, so that one must be constantly paging back and forth to see the references. We wish publishers would abandon this practice.