

**Matthew Levering. *Was the Reformation a Mistake? Why Catholic Doctrine is not Unbiblical*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016. 240 pp. \$16.99 (paper).**

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Matthew Levering has impressively accepted an invitation from Zondervan to contribute to the festivities surrounding the quincentenary of the Protestant Reformation by writing this volume. Though he does not call the Reformation a mistake, nevertheless he is convinced that the Reformers' objections to Catholic teaching were not well-founded, and he ventures a response to prove that Catholic doctrine is "not unbiblical."

The introductory chapter sets the scene for the discussion to follow. Our author expresses from the opening paragraphs his appreciation for many Protestants dear to him, from whom he has benefited in various ways. Though the division of the Church is lamentable, the Reformation has brought forth much good fruit through its emphasis on "love of Scripture, the authority of God's Word, salvation by God's grace, gospel preaching, Bible study, and personal faith and relationship with Christ" (16). In response to the personal invitation from Zondervan, Levering addresses nine critical points of disagreement between Protestants and Catholics raised by Luther during his lifetime: Scripture, Mary, the Eucharist, the seven sacraments, monasticism, justification and merit, purgatory, the saints, and the papacy. The structure of each chapter is as follows: first, a formulation of Luther's polemical objections to Catholic teaching; second, biblical reflections which serve not so much to prove the Church's doctrine on the respective matter, but to demonstrate its consistency with modes of reasoning present in the Bible itself. Of course, the question of what constitutes the 'biblical' character of a doctrine becomes eminently relevant. Levering emphasizes that the Bible itself testifies to the propriety of doctrinal development within the ecclesial-liturgical context. Admitting the necessity of reform in light of significant moral-spiritual shortcomings of the Catholic Church, especially during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Levering nevertheless insists that the Reformers were mistaken to consider Catholicism's teachings unbiblical. Thus, despite their intentions, the Reformers were inappropriately divisive.

*Scripture.* One of the more important objections from Luther to the Roman Catholic Church concerns the nature of the Bible. His conviction was that popes throughout history have put forth doctrines which cannot be substantiated by appeal to the biblical text. Furthermore, the authority of these figures to make dogmatic pronouncements was fatally undermined by their evident immorality and infidelity. Rather, for Luther, Scripture is quite clear to the person who has the Spirit of God, for whom the written Word is the only infallible and ultimately binding authority over the entire Church. In response, Levering notes the hierarchical structure of God's people as it is depicted in the pages of the Bible: some persons occupy a rank which is particular to them and which endows them with dogmatic authority not shared by every member of the Church, the apostles and elders of the Council of

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Jerusalem being a paradigmatic example. Though Scripture itself admits that some teachers in the Church will err and wander from the truth, God also guarantees that the Church can fulfill her nature as “the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15) by preserving her solemn doctrinal pronouncements (52). On this matter, Levering makes the point that Paul’s warning about the future infiltration of “godless and silly myths” into the Church (1 Tim 4:6-7) is unmotivated if these could easily be discerned as such by all the faithful; it is rather the teaching authorities of the Church who are authorized to address these matters and make binding pronouncements.

*Mary.* Though Luther agreed with the Catholic Church that Mary, through God’s grace, was without sin and that she is rightly designated by the honorific “Mother of God,” nevertheless he considered that much Marian piety distracted from Christ and undermined the doctrine of justification by faith. The reformer denied the doctrine of the Assumption as lacking explicit basis in Scripture. In response, Levering notes the unique respect and veneration due to the queen mothers in the Old Testament, which would presumably also fall to Mary as the mother of the King of kings. The Virgin’s relationship to her Son is unique, as was her participation in his sufferings, for which it is reasonable to believe that, like her Son, she should have been assumed body and spirit into heaven. A careful reading of the imagery of the twelfth chapter of Revelation may justify this doctrine.

*Eucharist.* Three aspects of the Catholic Church’s teaching and practice struck Luther as being unjustifiable: first, the withholding of the blood of Christ from the laity; second, the establishment of transubstantiation as the Church’s official eucharistic doctrine, when consubstantiation is judged a more reasonable view; third, the notion of the Mass as a sacrifice. Levering’s response focuses on addressing the final concern by way of an analysis of the Eucharist through the lens of the Passover sacrifice.

*The seven sacraments.* Luther recognized only baptism, Eucharist, and confession as genuine sacraments, admitting the sacramental status of the last of these in only a rather limited way, distinct from the Catholic understanding. Once more, the reformer’s objections are ultimately founded on the contention that the Church’s teaching lacks explicit scriptural support. Levering begins with a basic treatment of the nature of a sacrament in general as a visible sign which unites the faithful to Christ’s passion and resurrection. Then he sketches the general contours of a case for the sacramentality of confirmation, marriage, holy orders, and the anointing of the sick through an attentive consideration of the practice of Christ and the apostles in the New Testament.

*Monasticism.* Though granting that the intention behind monasticism is a good one, Martin Luther contended on the basis of his own experiences that, as a matter of fact, monks and nuns do not become holier; some become worse, failing to live up to their vows, falling into dreadful sexual sins which cannot be forgiven by the abbot or abbess and thus, out of shame, abuse the sacrament of confession and partake of the Eucharist while in sin. Monasticism further invites the attempt to earn salvation by works, whereas true holiness and freedom from sin comes through faithful contemplation of the Word of God. Levering’s rejoinder ably demonstrates that the essential practices and presuppositions of monasticism — the validity of different expressions of Christian life, the legitimate option of celibacy and poverty, and so on — find their basis in various biblical passages, as much in the teachings of Christ and the apostles, as also in the practices of the early Church.

*Justification and merit.* Luther famously rejected the notion that the grace of justification can be earned or merited by any good works; rather, it is obtained through faith

in Christ, whose alien righteousness is imputed to the believer and constitutes her confidence before God. Levering recognizes that justification is purely a gift, impossible to merit in virtue of any previous works. Still, he insists that concurrent with justification is the reception of the Holy Spirit, by virtue of which believers are enabled to perform meritorious works of love for which, if they fight the good fight and finish the race, they can also anticipate a reward from “the Lord, the righteous judge” (2 Tim 4:7-8).

*Purgatory.* In his Ninety-Five Theses, Martin Luther did not object to the doctrine of purgatory *per se* so much as to various aspects of contemporary Catholic thought about the matter which he reckoned excessively speculative and susceptible to abuse. Later in life, however, he denied the existence of post-mortem purgation altogether as lacking any basis in Scripture. The rejoinder from Levering begins with a discussion of texts such as Phil 1:23 — “My desire is to depart and be with Christ” — which suggest that after death and prior to the resurrection, Christians are brought into some sort of conscious presence of Christ. From the reality of the intermediate state, he proceeds to argue for the intercession of the saints who have died on the basis of the *communio sanctorum*, as well as for the purifying fire by which every person’s work will be disclosed (1 Cor 3:12-15).

*The saints.* Luther objected to the cult of the saints in the Catholicism of his time, which he considered to distract from Christ and to lead to the idolatrous worship and service of mere human beings. The Bible refers only to those who are alive and on earth as being saints, from which he concludes once more that the Roman Catholic Church had abandoned Scripture and invented false doctrines. Levering notes that the recollection of great saints from times past was present in Second Temple Judaism, for instance in Sirach and Wisdom. Hebrews in the New Testament engages in the same practice when it sings the praises of that “so great a cloud of witnesses” (12:1). The recollection and veneration of the saints is a way of bringing attention to the saving work of Christ, thanks to whom these persons lived in such holiness and devotion to God. Precisely because Christ is not in competition with his people, Paul can say something like: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1).

*Papacy.* Luther objected that immorality compromised the spiritual authority of popes, and that the Scriptures do not confer any special privileges or callings on Peter to the exclusion of the other apostles or even of all Christians in general. His interpretive tendency is to “democratize” Christian authority, so that the consent of the individual is required if any statement from a bishop or whomever is to be genuinely authoritative. Levering, on the other hand, brings to light the privileged place which Peter enjoyed among the apostles as the “rock” on which the Church would be built, emphasizing that the authority he received (e.g., the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” — Mt 16:19) is intended to preserve the unity of the Church. Christ, of course, knew that the Church would outlive the apostles themselves, and so the need for a “Peter” is present to every generation, entailing the succession of his office.

In his concluding chapter, Levering emphasizes that he has only been able to bring some brief scriptural considerations in favor of the Catholic position on each of the nine divisive issues enumerated above. A more complete demonstration would require “attending to how particular doctrinal interpretations of Scripture arise from within ‘the entirety of Christian faith and life,’ the entirety of the biblical warranted modes of biblical reasoning” (189). Levering’s language at this juncture is particularly significant insofar as it communicates the essence of the Roman Catholic approach to interpreting Scripture — namely, doing so from within the context of the Church’s lived experience.

The book terminates surprisingly with a forty page “mere Protestant response” to Levering’s treatment by the influential evangelical theologian Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Part of the surprise lies in the fact that Vanhoozer’s response was included in the present work at the free invitation of Levering himself (192), who already admitted many times to being very limited in space to address the question, “Was the Reformation a Mistake?”. Still, Levering saw fit to include a Reformed Protestant voice in his own treatment of these matters. (It is also revealed within the book that Vanhoozer had to be convinced by the publishers to contribute his response, evidently at Levering’s insistence (11).) Vanhoozer appreciates Levering as a person and scholar very much, bringing to the foreground the latter’s admirable and saintly irenicism (Vanhoozer calls him “St. Matthew”), though he predictably remains unconvinced that Roman Catholicism has been shown in the previous chapters “not to be unbiblical.” He rightly emphasizes that Roman Catholics and Protestants differ on the question of what it means to be “biblical,” the fundamental problem concerning the locus of theological authority. Vanhoozer does not admit Levering’s appeal to the Council of Jerusalem to prove that there exists a particular class of Christians who retain authority to make definitive dogmatic and practical pronouncements, pointing to the mention of “the whole church” alongside the apostles and elders in Acts 15:22.<sup>1</sup> He concludes: “Protestants appeal to Acts 15 to argue that biblical interpretation is the privilege and responsibility of the whole church, guided by the Holy Spirit and instructed by those whom the church recognizes as having the gifts commensurate with the offices of pastor, elder, bishop, and teacher” (205) — *everyone* is involved. He says that Roman Catholics like Levering operate according to a “normative” principle of being biblical, by which Vanhoozer understands that “a teaching is biblical as long as it is not explicitly prohibited by Scripture” (205). On the other hand, Protestants affirm a regulative principle, the sort presupposed by the question: “Where stands it written?” As Vanhoozer writes, “That it is written, or that it can be deduced from what has been written, stands as a *sine qua non* in Protestant theology” (206). On this basis, he argues in various places that Levering — in spite of his utilization of a rather Protestant strategy in responding to Luther’s critiques by interpreting Scripture in favor of Catholic teaching — does not succeed in showing that Roman Catholicism is sufficiently biblical in the sense Protestants themselves demand.<sup>2</sup> On the basis that Catholic teachings are either not explicitly affirmed as such by Scripture, nor are they readily deducible from the explicit statements of the text, Vanhoozer rejects Levering’s treatment of Marian dogma and the papacy. Vanhoozer then goes on to critique the “Roman” substance behind Levering’s scriptural-interpretive endeavors. In contradistinction to the Roman Catholic notion of the *totus Christus*, which sees the Church as a part of the whole body of Christ, an extension of His incarnation and a sacrament, an instrument by which He accomplishes His salvation, there is the Protestant view which affirms an elementary “asymmetry of divine and human action” (215) in keeping with the notion of *solus Christus*, permitting no other salvific activity except that of Christ, which occurred once for all and which is not repeatable or augmentable throughout the pre-eschatological history of His people (219-28). In the end, Vanhoozer

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<sup>1</sup> This is unconvincing. The contribution of “the whole church” concerned the decision “to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas” (Acts 15:22), not the dogmatic-practical conclusion of the Council itself.

<sup>2</sup> Here Vanhoozer perhaps does not grasp Levering’s approach with sufficient subtlety. Levering wishes to show the presence of certain forms of reasoning discernible in the biblical texts, beyond the plain propositions being explicitly stated and which are also operative in Catholic doctrinal development.

insists that Roman Catholicism is insufficiently *catholic*: it places too much authority in the particular — namely, in the church of Rome and its institutional hierarchy — to the exclusion of Scripture, the Word of God, which is universal. For mere Protestants, Scripture alone is the sole infallible theological authority to which all others are subject and responsible in their uncertainties and fallibility; Scripture is above the entire Church.

Of course, just as Vanhoozer is not convinced by Levering's scriptural meditations in defense of Catholic doctrine, so also the person sympathetic to Roman Catholicism will not (*should* not) find herself particularly moved by the mere Protestant response. Everything said is disputable. So consider, as a single example, Vanhoozer's treatment of Peter in response to Levering's defense of the papacy. Whereas Levering argues that Christ called Peter "Rock" and declared the foundation of his Church on the "Rock," Vanhoozer responds that the Greek terms used in the gospel are not the same in both instances (225), an observation intended to justify the interpretation that "the rock is not Peter himself but the truth of Jesus's teaching that he is the Christ that Peter confesses" (225). Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI/Joseph Ratzinger has noted in a treatment of the Petrine office that Jesus was not speaking Greek to Peter, but Aramaic, something evident through the rather Semitic quality of the language of the text, and He would have used one and the same word, *kepha*, twice without change.<sup>3</sup> So the argument presented by Vanhoozer is not decisive.

It is worth underlining that Ratzinger's response will prove unsatisfactory to mere Protestant readers of this review and those who sympathize with such a perspective. Unfortunately, there is simply too much to say: the differences between Roman Catholic and mere Protestant Christianity, in spite of great overlap and commonalities, are undeniably very profound and extensive. One of the weaknesses of this book is that Levering's profoundly irenic spirit rather unfortunately puts the Catholic position at a significant dialectical disadvantage by leaving so much space for Protestant objections and response. It is easy to fire off a number of brief objections to a particular view, but it is difficult to offer adequate and convincing responses which can help an objector "see the light," so to speak, and quite obviously it is altogether out of the question to offer such responses concisely. Levering has taken upon himself the rather herculean burden of making plausible the radically other world of Roman Catholic theology to his intended audience of "Bible-believing Christians who deem the disputed Catholic doctrines to be biblically mistaken" (187).

On the other hand, it does not seem to me that anything Levering says in his biblical reflections in each chapter would be unfamiliar to the moderately well-read student of Roman Catholicism. For that reason, the ideal audience for this book would probably be the Protestant who is *not* so well-read and who possesses the unsubstantiated impression that Roman Catholicism is hopelessly unbiblical. Indeed, *Was the Reformation a Mistake?* might be especially useful for undergraduate students. At the start of each chapter, Levering does well to include references to the relevant sections of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the documents of Vatican II, as well as certain encyclicals of recent popes such as St. Pope John Paul II. This supports the judgment that the intended audience is essentially uninformed and unfamiliar with the subject matter. But, again, Levering may not convince such persons that "Catholic doctrine is not unbiblical" because of the structure of the work

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), 60.

itself. The objections from Luther considered in each chapter only permit Levering to lay the foundation for a more developed Catholic notion of Mary or justification or whatever it may be, beyond which there is no space for further development and argumentation. Then comes Vanhoozer's relatively lengthy response, addressed to proposals which are incomplete and non-probative by Levering's own admission and which leaves the dissenting Reformation voices with the first and final word. Such self-effacement is eminently generous, even excessively so, and it would seem to undermine the purpose of the book.

In spite of this weakness, *Was the Reformation a Mistake?*, published now at the quincentenary of the event, serves as a good introduction to some of the principal controversies of this tremendous turning point in theological history. It should prove most helpful for the otherwise unfamiliar student of the Reformation, especially those just beginning to investigate these matters. At the very least, it may convince some readers that there is more to be said for the biblical basis of Roman Catholic doctrine than they may have previously thought. Levering does an excellent job illustrating the unique accents and modes of Catholic biblical reasoning, and Vanhoozer in turn demonstrates that the disputes between Protestants and Roman Catholics can be maintained in friendly, brotherly terms without either side comprising its convictions or minimizing the importance of the matters at hand.