

BOOK REVIEWS

Donald G. Bloesch. *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995. 329 pp. \$11.99.

There has been an unprecedented outpouring of recent Protestant scholarship that continues to bring forth new systematic theologies at an amazing rate. Writing some seventeen years after the publication of his widely read and highly praised two-volume set, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), noted North American theologian and respected evangelical scholar Donald G. Bloesch has once again raised his distinguished voice in the chorus of competing systematic theologies. The publication of *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love* is the third volume of a projected seven-volume enterprise in systematic theology that will firmly establish Donald G. Bloesch as a major theologian in the English-speaking world and beyond, and a leading evangelical voice at the end of this century.

After an introduction that sets the stage for the current debate on the doctrine of God, Bloesch deals in subsequent chapters with theology's attempt to define God and His essence, existence, and attributes, the question of a natural knowledge of God over against the self-revealing God, God's transcendence and His immanence, the power and wisdom of God, His holiness and love, the Trinity, and a discussion of the biblical-classical synthesis and the biblical-modern synthesis in the doctrine of God.

This book, as well as the whole series, is "addressed to the whole church—primarily for the purpose of healing wounds and building bridges" (11). And Bloesch ably succeeds in this objective. He is to be applauded for his irenic spirit and conciliatory attitude, even toward those with whom he differs in his understanding of God or disagrees with their interpretation of specific aspects. His desire to build bridges encompasses not only other evangelical and Protestant strands but also Catholic contributions. Wherever possible, he is trying to look for some common ground, rather than attacking or dismissing someone just because he or she comes from a different tradition than his own. Bloesch displays an openness to integrate different insights into what he calls "a comprehensive vision of evangelical catholicity" (261; cf. 49).

Bloesch is to be commended for his resolute conviction that today we need to recover a robust supernaturalism (84). His recovery of God's holiness as an important attribute of God leads him into an insightful discussion of the wrath of God (142ff.), even though his ambiguous comments on hell are less clear and biblically sustained than would be desirable (144). Time and again one comes across a judicious analysis of current issues and is rewarded by helpful formulations on difficult or controversial topics, such as our language about God, social justice and social action, the trinity, Open-View-Theism, process theology, and others.

Even though Bloesch refers to a wide spectrum of theological thinkers, ancient and contemporary, and deals with many classical and difficult subjects in

the doctrine of God, he never loses sight of his pastoral concern, which is characteristic also of his earlier publications.

His greatest strengths, however, are also areas with some definite deficiencies. While Bloesch demonstrates a remarkable breadth of theological reading, it is sometimes difficult to detect his own position in the omnium-gatherum of other theologians whom he quotes. While some early reviewers have compared Bloesch's new systematic theology to Wolfhart Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology* and hailed it as an "evangelical summa of the twentieth century," Bloesch has not written a systematic theology.

Unlike Pannenberg, who has succeeded in writing truly a systematic theology that is structured and developed systematically from one single idea, God, Bloesch rather resembles in his own way—though with definite differences in content and emphasis, to be sure—what Carl F. H. Henry has done before him in his multivolume work, *God, Revelation and Authority*. Unfortunately, however, Bloesch too often is simply presenting what others have said on a subject. This makes a good resource book on theological issues and positions, but at times he is less penetrating in his analysis and critique of some positions, and appears not as strong in developing his own constructive theology. While Bloesch amasses many helpful quotations from other theologians that provide notable insights and valuable perspectives, one wonders how Bloesch selects and chooses some statements over against others. This leads to perhaps his greatest weakness, namely, the inconsistency on the one hand in voicing his desire to faithfully listen to the biblical material, yet on the other hand hardly ever developing his argument and concept of God from a solid exegesis of Scripture! This becomes most apparent in his discussion of the attributes of God. Even though there are no objections to many of Bloesch's conclusions, one wonders how Bloesch knows the things he confesses about God and his inner Being. Even though there are numerous "proof-texts" sprinkled throughout his book, one misses a solidly backed biblical foundation of what he states. This leaves one with the unavoidable impression that some of his theological preferences are determined not so much by Scripture alone, but by other considerations. Could it be that Bloesch proceeds in this manner because, as he himself repeatedly points out, divine revelation is only primarily mirrored in the witness of the prophets and apostles of Scripture, but then also in the witness of the fathers and doctors of the holy catholic church (261)? Thus Scripture for him becomes just "the primary source and witness of this revelation" (28), rather than being the Word of God itself. Consequently for Bloesch, God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ is "communicated to us by the Spirit through Holy Scripture and the ongoing commentary on Scripture in the church" (27-28). On this central and crucially important point Bloesch is not unambiguously committed to the sole authority of Scripture but rather to the authority of the Word of God as testified to in Scripture, which seems to point to the fact that some of his presuppositions and conclusions about God are derived *extra scripturam*.