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*Was the Reformation A Mistake? Why Catholic Doctrine is Not
Unbiblical* by Matthew Levering (review)

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Was the Reformation A Mistake? Why Catholic Doctrine is Not Unbiblical. By Matthew Levering, with a response by Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017. 240 pp.

This is an intriguing book with an unusual, yet very welcomed premise. Levering, Chair of Theology at Mundelein Seminary in Illinois, attempts to demonstrate that the Reformational cry against the Roman church's "unbiblical" doctrines is, in fact, inaccurate in the present context of that church's teachings. In ten carefully crafted chapters, Levering introduces his thesis and then provides Luther's arguments against nine Catholic doctrines. These church-dividing issues as Levering identifies them are scripture, Mary, the Lord's Supper, the seven sacraments, monasticism, justification and merit, purgatory, saints, and the papacy. Levering then responds to Luther with "biblical" evidence, or as he calls it "biblical reasoning . . . through a liturgically inflected and communal process" (20), to validate that the Roman church retains some kind of scriptural connections for its doctrines. The book concludes with a Protestant response by Vanhoozer of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Illinois.

Introductory notes on each topic begin with references to pertinent paragraphs from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or to relevant papal encyclicals or church statements. Then specific critiques from Martin Luther's writings are presented. In most chapters, Levering exhibits a good grasp of Luther's concerns about Roman dogma and, for the most part, cites Luther adequately. Only in the chapter on monasticism does he miss Luther's positive as well as negative critique of vows. In answer to the book's title question, Levering admits that "there had to be a Reformation . . ." and that the Reformers ". . . were right in seeking reform" (31). Under the chapter on "Justification and Merit," Levering seems to understand Luther's concept of justification. He even asserts in a footnote, "Luther separates justification and sanctification rather strictly . . ." (123). Yet, in his Roman response, Levering joins the two concepts, emphasizing the activity of the Holy Spirit which empowers the good works which merit salvation (as Vanhoozer also notes on 222).

Levering concludes that chapter by saying “. . . due to the indwelling Spirit of Christ, Paul can merit eternal life . . .” (140). Thus, as Vanhoozer asserts, Roman doctrine “does appear *suprabiblical*, in the sense of supplementing what the Bible directly teaches (or what is directly implied) with ideas derived from somewhere else” (213), rather than being biblical as Protestants understand *sola scriptura*.

Most helpful is Vanhoozer’s in-depth response to several of Levering’s chapters—scripture, Marian devotion, justification, and purgatory. This chapter is given the dubious title, “A Mere Protestant Response,” possibly because Vanhoozer’s Reformed background leads him to cite Calvin and Wesley more than Luther (a more appropriate interlocutor would have been one of several American Luther scholars who are well-known in *Lutheran Quarterly* circles). While Vanhoozer begins with a gentle affirmation of Levering’s work, his overall critique of the Roman position centers not on works-righteousness, but on authority, particularly Levering’s use of ecclesiastical authority over against biblical authority. This final chapter is worth the purchase of the book as Vanhoozer provides solidly theological and biblical points of critique and proceeds to demonstrate “why ‘not unbiblical’ is not necessarily equivalent to ‘biblical’” (201). For example, Levering connects Matthew 18:15–17 to monasticism, concluding, “Jesus thereby mandates that we listen to and obey the decision of the church” (118), but does not draw this from the biblical text.

Overall, Levering’s “biblical” replies to Luther’s sixteenth-century treatises would have been more beneficial if Levering had articulated specific exegetical arguments based on biblical texts instead of topic-related biblical allusions. The church-dividing issues remain and it is noteworthy that Luther’s critiques still stand the test of time. Yet, the Roman openness to dialogue in this age of ecumenism is welcome. This book sets the stage for further opportunities to carry on a discussion of specific doctrinal concerns. Ecumenical scholars and clergy associations who desire closer ecumenical ties will find this book worthy of further study as a conversation partner.

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