

Christine Helmer. *Theology and the End of Doctrine*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014. 196 pages. \$27.24.

Christine Helmer of Northwestern University has written a fascinating work on the place of doctrine in theology and religious studies. The result is a fascinating read that names the “end” of doctrine in a two-fold sense: the end of a certain, authoritative understanding of doctrine and the “end” that is doctrine’s purpose relative to its divine referent.

The first sense of doctrine’s ending is embodied in the development, in reaction to Schleiermacher, which sees theology as non-referential and focused on authorizing a kind of ecclesial identity. The goal with Helmer’s portrayal is not, however, to succumb to the old anti-Schleiermacher reading that relegates his theological work to “culture” or “experience,” but acknowledges that doctrine itself is experience- and culture-bound by virtue of the fact that it is socially constructed. Ironically, Helmer points out, Barth himself is *comfortable* with the social construction of doctrine, in that every doctrinal formulation becomes subject to the judgment of the eternal Word of God. In this way, Helmer suggests that this “end” of theology as a discourse of the absolutely grounded is something that we can all live with, given the sordid history of dogmatic authoritarianism. The end of doctrine is near.

And yet, long live doctrine! Also, in Barth, we see a desire to set a new “end” for doctrine, an end in the sense of telos or reference. Theology is not merely some reducible science divisible by culture or politics or any other human project without remainder. Theology is about God. And it is this strange “reality” that gives doctrine some ongoing life and value, not as authoritative propositions, but precisely in our attempt to think theologically through culture and experience in relation to God. Here, Schleiermacher, now re-read beyond the flattened reading of Brunner (and perhaps Barth), offers help. This is all the more necessary since it is precisely the issue of reference that is bracketed in the late-twentieth-century theological model offered by Lindbeck’s use of Geertz’s notion of culture with a view toward understanding doctrine as a type of cultural grammar, possessing “sense,” but not tested by external “reference.”

In a creative ending Helmer draws conclusions for a theological discourse that has relegated doctrine to “rules” for perpetuating the church’s unique cultural identity and a religious-studies discourse that cannot but help reduce the phenomenon of “religion” to its cultural, political, or psychological cognates. Helmer envisions both fields as reanimated by moving past the end of doctrine in the authoritative sense and the end or purpose of doctrine is “...divinity and its manifold relations to the created world. It has to do with the living reality of God.” This involves, for Helmer, the task of predication, which multiplies theology’s meaning across new frames of reference in different historical moments. Doctrine has an end, for Helmer, which goes beyond totalizing unities and reaches instead for critical reflection on the language of divinity itself.

In my view, this book is significant for homiletical theology in important ways. Homiletics often loses its theological nerve. By that, I do not mean that theology is absent from what we do, but rather that we find ourselves at an analogous impasse: somewhere between a vitiated theology that can no longer speak theologically beyond the re-inscription of culture, or politics or power and a view of theology cut off from a world of reference in the name of faithful language of the church’s cultural grammar. Theology is and should be risky business. Helmer does us the favor of taking this difficult theological conversation further—somewhere beyond to the end of doctrine, which may actually be the beginning of theology naming something new.

For my part, I will be recommending this book to homiletics doctoral students—even though, Helmer’s book is at points a challenging read. However, the focus of her argument belongs in any M.Div. class where a theology of the gospel for this time and place, in this context/situation, still needs to be spoken. If the end of doctrine is the relinquishment of an authoritative discourse that overwrites culture, experience, and culture, then let it end. But if, as Helmer points out, the end of doctrine is the reality of God in and through context and experience, and not merely a re-inscribing of an epistemic privilege, then bring it on. In this respect, Helmer’s book may just help homiletics scholars and emerging preachers alike to learn to name God into the world again.

David Schnasa Jacobsen, Boston University School of Theology, Boston, MA