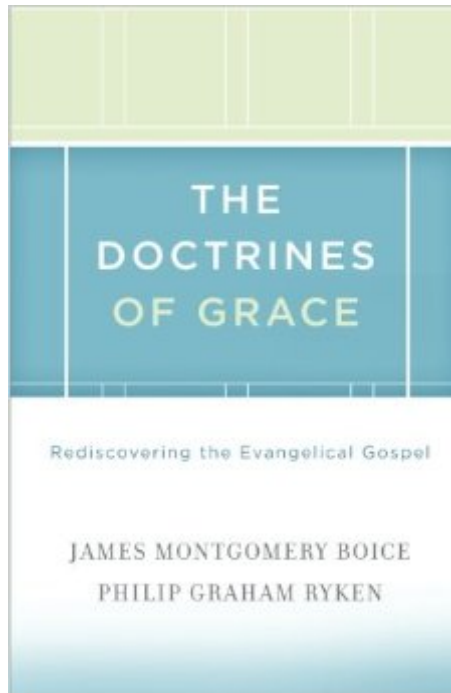


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The Doctrines Of Grace: Rediscovering The Evangelical Gospel



Synopsis

Two respected pastors make a compelling case for the need to recover the five fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. We live in an age of weak theology and casual Christianity. And this situation will continue as long as God's people insist on substituting intuition for truth, feeling for belief, and immediate gratification for enduring hope. Yet if evangelicalism will again denounce this self-centered faith and place Christ and his cross at the center of its vision, the church will see great days once more. According to authors James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken, this will happen when believers specifically return to the gospel foundation with its doctrines of radical depravity, unconditional election, particular redemption, efficacious grace, and persevering grace. As these two noted pastors provide a compelling exposition of these essential truths, they also consider the current challenges, leaving no doubt that the church suffers when the doctrines of grace are neglected. Only in a faith that is practical-minded, kindhearted, and Bible-based will Christians recover what they have lost in this postmodern age. Now in paperback.

Book Information

Paperback: 240 pages

Publisher: Crossway; Reprint edition (April 1, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1433511282

ISBN-13: 978-1433511288

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.5 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (42 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #395,843 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #167 in Â Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Christian Denominations & Sects > Protestantism > Calvinist #520 in Â Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Theology > Salvation Theory #690 in Â Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Ministry & Evangelism > Evangelism

Customer Reviews

This work is a collaborative effort of the late James Montgomery Boice and his successor at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Philip Ryken. This is not a book that will make everyone happy because it deliberately intends to chasten contemporary evangelicalism on a number of fronts. But I felt that it was a very good introduction to Reformed theology that both seasoned theologians and amateurs to theological thought can profit from. The controversial nature of the book begins in the

first sentence of the first chapter, when it announces that evangelicalism stands or falls with Calvinism, as B.B. Warfield once remarked. From this, the authors lament what they believe is the state of thorough worldliness that has established residency within the evangelical church, and their belief that a return to the core tenets of Reformed theology is the best and only effective antidote. From there, a solid introductory analysis of the 5 points of Calvinism is given. I found that these analyses were pretty thorough, yet very readable and understandable at an introductory level. In contrast to the rather elevated language of folks like Kuyper, Boettner, Machen, Warfield, and Hodge, Boice and Ryken bring the fundamentals of Reformed theology down to a layperson's level while still being unapologetic about these beliefs. In this analysis of the 5 points, the authors effectively take on some of the more common objections to Reformed theology that tend to surface, although again, because of the introductory nature of the book, the reader should not expect full orbbed and exhaustive rebuttals here. The one rebuttal that I thought was especially insightful was where the authors, while responding to the objection that Reformed theology relies too much on the 'two wills of God' to harmonize their theology, point out that the free-will theists who tend to voice this objection engage in exactly the same thing by suggesting by default that in contrast to God's revealed will in the Bible, God's primary purpose (or secret will) is in preserving the supposed free will of man. Very insightful point. The authors also devote a great deal of time both to analyzing the fruits of Calvinism in history, as well as presenting a Calvinist life view that penetrates all aspects of life and civilization. On the latter point, the authors appear to pattern the Calvinist worldview heavily upon the views of Kuyper as articulated at Princeton over 100 years ago. While I found this section to be very good and very refreshing in many ways, it should be understood by the reader that Calvinism has not historically been, nor is currently monolithic in how it views the believer's attitude and involvement in politics, science, art, and other areas. Nonetheless, I found that Boice and Ryken offered some very good thoughts in this area. Overall, I highly commend this book to someone who is interested in studying and learning about the Reformed faith, especially those who are just beginning this journey. This book is very helpful for those who are new to theology, but is also quite useful to those with more experience in this area. A very good book.

First off, some introductory remarks. This is Boice's last work before his death in 2000 of cancer. He wrote the bulk of the material contained in this book. Ryken, one of Boice's assistant pastors, completed it upon his death, contributing a closing chapter as well as editing for style and actually writing the opening two chapters entirely from Boice's notes and resources. Boice himself had already drafted the middle chapters detailing the doctrines of grace. This book is an excellent,

excellent introduction to the doctrines of grace, widely known for better or for worse as Calvinism. It is also a very compelling work, one that should move the reader to desire further investigation at the very least and full commitment at the very best. It avoids what one of my good friends has termed "my Calvinism is better than your Calvinism," which would have caused me to march back to the bookstore and demand my money back. ;-)

This book does, however, make the implicit claim (erroneously, in my opinion) that Arminian theology leads to what Arthur Pink in *The Sovereignty of God* calls liberalism. More accurately, it insists that Arminian theology leads to a man-centered gospel, which in itself is a hallmark of liberalism. While you will find no disagreement from me if you were to assert that a significant majority of liberals (if not all) are Arminian in theology, you will get a major disagreement that Arminianism leads to liberalism. I have been taught by and worked under conservative, orthodox, non-Calvinist leaders who are extremely Godly men, and I am uncomfortable with the assertion that their gospel is man-centered, when nothing could be further from the truth. However, the way this book presents the gospel leaves no doubt in my mind that any gospel that does not emphasize the sovereignty of God is sorely lacking. If none can be saved without God's help, then why insist that faith is a human work and not a gift of God? That is contradictory and unbiblical.

The middle chapters are without question excellent introductions. Following the TULIP acrostic, the authors detail each point in such a way that you are given a clear understanding of what each point entails, without feeling the need to write a volume on each. While the TULIP acrostic is followed, the authors eschew the traditional terms (total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance of the saints) for a much gentler and more polite terminology: Radical Depravity, Unconditional Election, Particular Redemption, Efficacious Grace, and Persevering Grace. I believe the authors are wise to take this tack, as I agree the traditional terms are loaded weapons for both sides of the issue and softening terminology while retaining accuracy potentially fosters discussion. Please be advised that in no way do they "water down" the doctrines by taking a softer stance in terminology. Indeed, many of the discussions in these chapters are hard for those who are unsure or whom do not subscribe to the doctrines of grace. They do not shy away from the issues surrounding them; however they leave the punching bags at home. For that I'm thankful. It actually made some discussions harder for me in some respects to have such a softer approach.

The authors close the book with an extremely helpful discussion on two issues: what a "true Calvinist" looks like, and how Calvinism should work in everyday life. A quote I will share from the eighth chapter: "[S]o many of those who have discovered the beauty of Reformed theology, as described in this book, are anything but beautiful themselves.... They have a bad reputation, and sadly, perhaps some of it is deserved." The authors

work diligently in this chapter to combat the rigid, unfeeling, unsympathetic Calvinism that seems to be rampant and growing in some circles, instead showing a Calvinism that genuinely seeks the mind of Christ. Indeed, I wholeheartedly agree with the authors' vision of what a "true Calvinist" should look like--one conformed to the image of Christ. Oh, would that both Calvinists and Arminians would seek to be conformed to Christ in all things instead of resorting to petty bickering! We'd get further in these discussions if only our ultimate goal was Christ and Him crucified. I very much appreciated the final chapter, penned by Ryken, giving a practical look at what I'm going to term "applied Calvinism." He seeks to answer the question, "How does Calvinism work itself out in life?" His answer can be summed up in a single statement from the ninth and final chapter: "[T]he heart of Reformed theology is a passion for God's glory, not simply in redemption but in all of creation." This includes our work, our play, our disciplines such as art, finance, science, history, government, and so on. Ryken presents a compelling vision for Calvinist interaction with the world that can only be described as wholly Christian. I remarked to a friend that this book is wonderful for someone investigating the doctrines because one does not have to chew on them, one can drink them. I now revise that statement. This book is not a milk-bottle, but is a bowl of stew or goulash, as opposed to a full-on steak dinner. It is intended for the layman, but assumes some basic level of theological knowledge. It is an excellent springboard for serious study of the doctrines of grace. This book is highly recommended by me to anyone who wants to seriously begin to study what Calvinism is all about without the debate surrounding it.

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