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John Webster. *Holiness*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. Pp. 122. \$18.00 (Paper).

[1] This is a thin and yet substantive book written by a theologian who is at the top of his game. It is "a small exercise in dogmatic theology, a trinitarian dogmatics of holiness" (1). Dogmatic theology is first an office of the Church of Jesus Christ: "(t)he self-giving presence of Christ in the Church is the law of theology, the reality which governs theological reason" (2-3). Dogmatic theology is also confessional theology: it is neither conversational theology, which draws upon "a wide range of cultural, philosophical and religious sources to build up an account of the Christian faith" (4) through a two-way conversation, nor is it a comparative theology which seeks to identify and highlight common themes of the world religions. Rather, the concern of a trinitarian dogmatics of holiness is "with the path taken by the holy three-in-one who, in majestic fulfillment of his own freedom, elects, reconciles and perfects the creature for holy obedience" (5).

[2] If Webster is anything, he is an orderly thinker. The book is divided into four chapters with a brief conclusion at the end. Each chapter is organized around a propositional statement that clearly expresses what Webster intends to say, and each of these brief chapters is packed with deep theological reflections.

[3] The first chapter is called "The Holiness of Theology." Theology is a communal activity undertaken in dependence upon the Holy Spirit among the fellowship of saints for the purpose of glorifying God. It is an exercise of holy reason: "God is not summoned into the presence of reason; reason is summoned into the presence of God" (17). As an activity of holy reason theology is totally dependent upon God's self-giving and communicative presence in Jesus Christ, a presence mediated by the Holy Spirit within the body of Christ. Theology, then, is a receptive enterprise, which depends upon God as its object, who is always Subject. God's communicative presence is set forth in Holy Scripture.

[4] The second chapter is entitled "The Holiness of God." A confessional theology of holiness is based on God's holiness as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In Scripture God speaks and reveals his name, and God's name is God's enacted identity. God's holiness is "pure majesty in relation. . . Majesty and relation are not opposed moments in God's holiness; they

are simply different articulations of the selfsame reality" (41). The holiness of God is not simply identified "as that which distances God from us: rather, God is holy precisely as the one who in majesty and freedom and sovereign power bends down to us in mercy" (45). As the Holy One God seeks to establish and build a loving and righteous fellowship among the people of God.

[5] The third chapter, "The Holiness of the Church," describes how God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit elects, establishes and perfects "a people to become God's covenant partners and the fellowship of the saints" (57). It is based on an "alien sanctity," a holiness which is not of its own making, but rather flows from the gift of God's mercy in Jesus Christ. "The Church is what it is in the ceaseless gift of its being through the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit who accomplish the will of the Father in gathering a holy people to himself. Only thus, I want to suggest, can we retain the wisdom of the Church's sanctity as an *alien* sanctity, a non-possessable holiness" (56). The holiness of the Church is made known through such practices as confession, prayer, mission and evangelism.

[6] The fourth chapter is called "The Holiness of the Christian," which describes the sanctification of Christians. Not surprisingly, Webster draws most heavily upon John Calvin to describe God's work of justification and sanctification as well as the "alien sanctity" by which Christians live, move and have their being. This active life of holy fellowship is "at every moment characterized by mortification and vivification" (88). The great evangelical declaration that describes the entire life of Christian holiness is that we belong to Christ - we are the Lord's. The gift of evangelical freedom, which is a strange gift, is made actual in obedience, freedom and love.

[7] In the all-too-brief conclusion Webster not only summarizes his book, but contrasts the gift of evangelical freedom with the voluntarism of rebellion and the voluntarism of consumption, which are so rampart in today's culture.

[8] I want to make three comments about this book. First, Webster is well aware that many will criticize his approach for its isolation from social, religious, and philosophical concerns. There is an almost serene and peaceful tone about this exercise of dogmatic theology, done in response to the saving presence of Christ, but this comes - some will say - at the cost of serious engagement with other fields of learning. Webster is apparently willing to pay this price. Second, the book is hopefully the prelude to something greater to come: it represents the beginning of a much larger project in dogmatic theology. Third, the book is too brief, and this is why it can be frustrating to read. It is not enough to throw out brief critical comments about metaphysical theism and philosophical theism in the analytic mode: these critical comments need to be defended and developed. Webster could have also found more ways to illustrate the points that he is making, especially in the chapter on the holiness of Christians. Here he could learn from his mentor, Barth, and from von Balthasar. Perhaps my chief complaint about the book is that it is too much like a predictable lecture (but not a long, tedious one!) and not enough like a good book of theology (think of Barth's small print sections!) that engages the reader on a number of different levels. Still, I liked *Holiness* and I highly recommend it.

Ken Williams

