How are we to assess this series as reflected in these three volumes? There is benefit in recognizing certain timeless elements in the human religious and spiritual experience, allowing such considerations to be accommodated in the interpretive enterprise. The series would have benefitted, however, from clearer theological guidelines on how to avoid the dangers and excesses of allegorical interpretations while retaining the value of controlled typological, promise-and-fulfillment, redemptive-historical, or Christ-centered methods of interpretation.

It is difficult to predict whether there will be a significant readership to embrace this series. Although it is intended to clarify rather than to obscure, the theological language employed in places will be a challenge for some lay readers. For specialists, we might predict, the method employed in turning to the classic themes of the Christian faith while largely ignoring most contemporary tools of biblical exegesis, will be received in places as refreshing and elsewhere as quite maddening. The Brazos Commentary series is a daring (or brazen) attempt to make a small step forward by taking a giant leap backward in the history of theological interpretation.

—William T. Koopmans


In Reviving Evangelical Ethics, Wyndy Corbin Reuschling puts the Christian back into Christian Ethics. She reprises the classical approaches to ethics: de-ontology, teleology, and virtue, showing the many benefits that each one possesses. She then goes on to note, however, that each classical theory lacks connection to or concordance with Christ and the Scriptures. The de-ontology of Immanuel Kant does not need God, and a reader who seeks to use the Bible as a rational rulebook will not encounter God. In teleology, and especially the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill, an individual seeks an ill-defined happiness for all while failing to account for the particular needs of the poor and the weak. The virtue ethics of Aristotle elevates the qualities of upper-class Athenian males that dramatically contrast with the virtues of Christ.

After reviewing and critiquing each classical theory, Reuschling formulates constructive proposals for making these ethical systems relevant to common Christian believers. Yes, there are rules in the Christian faith, but they are related to the person who made them. Yes, we must consider consequences, but the ultimate consequence is the kingdom of God. Yes, we must develop virtue, but then ultimately, virtues are not of our own making but Christ’s. Topping all of these recommendations is the need to form a Christian conscience. This is done within the Christian community, and it requires a sanctified imagination.

Reuschling uses clean prose and knows her classical and Christian ethics. She writes as a believer who is also a scholar. This text should be a welcome addition not only to the libraries of Christian ethicists but also to pastors and preachers who desire to improve their own moral thinking and practice.

—Kent Van Til


Alan Sell, who enjoys a well-deserved reputation for his historical-theological investigations across four decades, including The Great Debate: Calvinism, Arminianism and Salvation (1982), and Defending and Declaring the Faith (1987) has established himself, late in his career, as the leading interpreter of the English Dissenting Reformed tradition. That branch of the Reformed family illustrious in the two centuries following the 1662 Act of Uniformity (when it declined to conform to the Church of England’s formularies and suffered ostracism as a result) and that gave us Isaac Watts, Philip Doddridge, John Angell James, and R. W. Dale (to name but a few) has fallen on hard times in the century past. Now, with the passing of such luminaries as Geoffrey Nuttall (1911–2007), renowned for a half-century as a prime interpreter of this tradition to the wider Christian world, Sell—a generation younger—remains to carry on the important work of interpreting this movement for the wider Christian world as well as applying lessons from the past for the movement as it exists today in diminished form.

In this work, the author highlights the careers of ten Dissenting theologians in the period 1700–1970, most of whom carried out their life’s work in relative obscurity (thus the use of Hinterland in the title). Under the ostracism English Dissenters endured, their students for the ministry, as well as aspiring professionals, were denied access to that nation’s (though not Scotland’s) universities; these hinterland theologians labored in what were at first called academies and only later were styled colleges. Only in the late nineteenth century did one of them gain university affiliation (Spring Hill College, Birmingham became Mansfield College, Oxford in 1889). This process of compaction and assimilation of educational systems took until after the middle-twentieth century to reach its conclusion. Until it was complete, English Dissenting Reformed theology constituted a vigorous subculture, a kind of parallel universe that while well-informed by developments in Europe and America could not take on, rather alone, within the United Kingdom.

Thus, Sell has written chapters drawing attention to such theological lights as Thomas Ridgley (1667–1794), D. W. Simon (1890–1909), Walter F. Adeney (1849–1929) and R. S. Franks (1871–1964) in the belief that these almost-forgotten doyens of the past ought to have an ongoing role to play in rejuvenating theological work within the English Dissenting tradition (now largely but not completely subsumed within the United Reformed Church, an amalgamation of 1972) as well as beyond. The aim is to be admired.
Yet, the sober reality is that the influence, the numbers, and the convictions that made English Dissent a power to be reckoned with in the period up to the two World Wars are things that have largely evaporated. The very colleges associated with the theologians Sell highlights have, through amalgamation and university affiliation, been winnowed down to a shadow of their former selves. Numerous of them now exist only as archive holdings in the vaults of the University of Manchester. This is a story that has affected Sell himself; the Aberystwyth (Wales) college of theology he joined late in his career closed in 2002. Additionally, the question—of such magnitude that it constitutes what we might call “the elephant in the room”—as to what role (good, bad, or indifferent) Sell’s theologians played in this unraveling of England’s Reformed tradition. His skillful portrayal (which divides his ten theologians into four chronological epochs) demonstrates effectively that these teachers and/or writers felt the social, intellectual, and theological currents at work across two and a half centuries and consequently brought changes to Dissent’s theology. This in itself is unsurprising.

Yet, the pattern observed was one of always less loyalty to the doctrinal articles of an earlier period, of relaxation of earlier dogmatism, of steady (though not slavish) appropriation of the latest European theological currents. On Sell’s reckoning, by the early twentieth century, the most hopeful elements in the Dissenting theological tradition were those he labels liberal-evangelical, i.e., those who combined theological progressiveness with warm evangelical piety. Over time, however, even this emphasis was dissipated and his respected theologians were by early twentieth century lamenting the evaporation of all real interest in dogmatic theology within their Dissenting tradition. In the wider scheme of things, the experience of the English Reformed Dissenting tradition during this period paralleled that of other branches of the Reformed tradition within Great Britain, on the Continent, and in North America.

Alan Sell’s writing is a work of love and of profound respect. There is no disguising that he considers the liberal evangelicals of the early twentieth century worthy of fresh attention and fresh respect. Those whose works are already on my library shelves (e.g., Adeney and Franks) can now be taken down and better understood in their contexts. When Sell has done his best to portray them in a winsome way, he is left with the equivalent of Humpty-Dumpty whose shell seems incapable of being reassembled once it has been broken to pieces. We must ask ourselves whether there was not another way forward. Sell, like the Dissenting tradition whose theological unravelling he documents, has no warm regard for a confessional theology. We may acknowledge, with him, that some forms of confessional theology have led to a dogmatic stance that is chiefly reiterative, too content to repeat the formulations of a bygone era when the cultural situation has changed drastically. What Sell’s analysis cannot counter is the fact that where vigorous dogmatic theology lives on in Protestantism today in ways that affect proclamation and catechesis, this is not unrelated to a resorting to and careful appeal to the creeds and confessions passed down to us.

*Hinterland Theology* is a remarkable and thought-provoking work. Its very bulk as a paperback of over 600 pages will work to limit its wide usefulness. It must also be noted with sadness that much stricter copyediting was called for; the number of typographical errors far exceeds what we have come to expect in a Paternoster volume.

—Kenneth J. Stewart


It is widely recognized in historical-theological circles that Douglas Sweeney, professor of church history and the history of Christian thought at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, is a leading authority in the realm of American evangelicalism in general and of Jonathan Edwards and the Edwardsean variety of the Reformed tradition in particular. As coeditor and author of several studies in this realm, Sweeney maintains, without qualification, that Edwards is the most important thinker in American evangelical history. As testimony to his enormous and enduring stature, Edwards’s writings have never gone out of print, and Edwards remains the frequent subject of books, doctoral dissertations, seminars, and conferences. Even so, Sweeney believes that a crucial and promising avenue of inquiry has been largely neglected, as “few have written books on Edwards aimed at fellow Christians, people looking for a state-of-the-art discussion of his life in order to use him as a model of Christian faith, thought and ministry” (17). Moreover, Sweeney believes that few have helped Christians adequately grasp Edwards’s deep and passionate love for Scripture, or adequately understand the profound and far-reaching influence that Scripture had on this giant of the American evangelical movement. In an effort to help fill this lacuna, Sweeney has written this eminently engaging book on Edwards’s life and labors, a book that is informative, insightful, and remarkably thorough, despite its relative brevity.

The wonderfully helpful prefatory material includes a chronology of the highlights in Edwards’s life as well as a brief registry of his closest relations, including his parents, siblings, wife, children, and slaves. Then follows the book’s introduction, where Sweeney deftly orients his readers to the time and place in which Edwards lived, painting a vivid picture of eighteenth-century small-town Puritan New England. Here Sweeney takes particular pains to demonstrate the profoundly biblical cast of Edwards’s world, a world that has since faded into history, rendering it impossible to retrieve. Cognizant that the past always remains somewhat strange and foreign, Sweeney issues a preliminary caution to his fellow Edwards admirers, reminding them that it is both impossible and wrong-headed