

Book review of - Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically by Beth Felker Jones

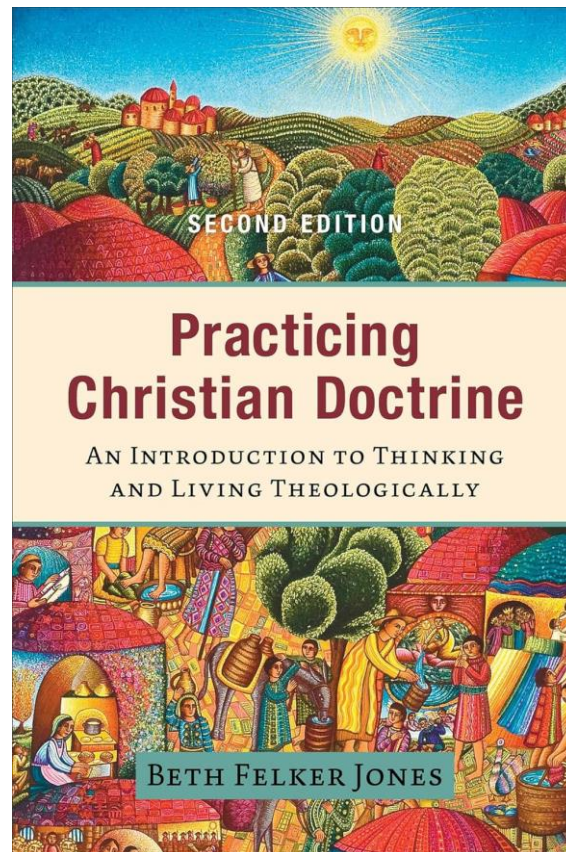


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Beth Felker Jones is a professor in systematic theology, which is a rational approach to aspects such as doctrines, the nature of God, interpretation of text, the nature of scripture and the application of these in the modern day.¹ Her book is written from an Evangelical perspective and appears to be directed toward applying understanding to aspects of everyday life. This approach has been welcomed for use in education to provide a framework for practical application of doctrines.² Wayne Grudem cites John Frame when describing systematic theology, 'Systematic theology is any study that answers the question "What does the whole Bible teach us today?" about any given topic.'³

The title 'Practising Christian Doctrine' suggests it is geared more toward practical applications, with the sub-title 'An Introduction to Living and Thinking Theologically' hinting that the book will be less involved with the intellectual considerations, and therefore more understandable to the reader. During a podcast, Beth Felker Jones described that the desire to write the book was based upon connecting doctrine to actual life, and to provide a basic framework into theology to use as an educational resource. She further explains that she makes considerations and comparisons with many other topics such as the arts, philosophy, politics and science, and their interconnectedness, to show how theology and doctrine is important to all things in life.⁴ The introduction of the book explains her theological approach as a classical systematic Christian approach; this is useful to establish and informs the reader that they will not be encountering for example, Hermeneutic or historical theology.⁵

The book begins with a story of Josiah, demonstrating the connection between Scripture, doctrine and practice by showing how we can become lost to our faith, but that by following doctrine we can reconnect with God, and how God keeps his promise to the people even when they falter. It also suggests that learning from our mistakes can be a powerful lesson; no-one wants to sit in their mistakes, prompting movement forward out of our old way of thinking and producing a progression forward.

¹ Lisa Loraine Baker, What Is Systematic Theology and Why Do We Need It? *Bible Study Tools*, (2021), <<https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/what-is-systematic-theology-and-why-do-we-need-it.html>>. [accessed 30 April 2025].

² Gordon, Caleb. 2023. "Review of Dr. Beth Felker Jones' Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically." *Eleutheria: John W. Rawlings School of Divinity Academic Journal* 7, (2). <<https://doi.org/10.70623/RAAU5458>>. [accessed 28 April 2025].

³ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction To Biblical Doctrine*, (Leicester: Zondervan Academic, 1994), p.21.

⁴ Beth Jones, *Practising Christian Doctrine*, <https://youtu.be/S8FI1M3sjPQ?si=jphjIn0aQxInZnJX>. [accessed 28 April 2025].

⁵ Stanley E. Porter & Beth M. Stovell, eds., *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, (Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2012).

The author then describes what her faith looks like in order to allow the reader a basis from which the work is written. She explains her Christianity as Evangelical and Ecumenical, which both have an acceptance of other denominations and cultural differences.^{6;7}

In the first two chapters, 'Speaking of God' and 'Knowing God', the author discusses the importance of how we talk about, and to God, and the words we use to do so. She stresses how it is necessary to follow God's revelations using a dialogue in-fitting with the way in which God expects us to conduct ourselves. In explaining theology, she highlights the importance of learning to speak about and consider God to enhance our faith; these are theological practices. To attain this, she discusses the need to not only understand the doctrines, but to live by the values they teach, whilst also acknowledging the connections between the doctrines to enable a complete picture of what God is trying to share with us. The author does not appear to commit to the controversy of whether experience (individualistic or cultural) is a consideration in interpretation of the doctrines, she does however conclude that it is through God's grace, despite our sins, that he is offering salvation through adherence to the practices he commands. She continues on to explain why the meaning behind God's revelations to us are not always immediately apparent, by explaining that the revelations are often analogous to more basic understandings. She also points toward our sinful nature as an impediment to discovering meaning, as we are generally service to self before anything else. Jerry Bridges in his book 'Respectable Sins' describes some so called 'lesser sins'; these include emotions like jealousy, anger, and sadness. These sins come from within, and do not necessarily intrude upon anyone or anything else, however, as he points out, '...when I indulge in any of the so-called acceptable sins, I am not only despising God's law, but at the same time I am despising God Himself'.⁸ The importance of scripture is a theme throughout the book paying particular attention to God's revelations. Two types of revelation are described, 'general revelation' and 'special revelation'; the former associated with what God has shown us to be, and the latter which is revealed through somethings new. The description of special revelation may be somewhat difficult to understand, but does appear to be associated with both scripture, and personal revelations we may have as a result of acknowledging and practicing doctrine.

Within the next three chapters, 'The God We Worship', 'A Delightful World' and 'Reflecting God's Image', the author discusses the doctrine of Trinity, creation and providence and a theological anthropology of mankind. The author begins by reiterating the importance of how we speak of God, and in particular what God informs us he is. She explains that it took time to fully understand the Triune nature of God, as it was first thought that seeing God as the Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit, would detract from God's oneness. She examples the types of heretic opinions; adoptionism, modalism and Arianism and describes why these opinions were considered. Adoptionism proposed that Jesus was provided his place through adoption by God, raising his status from an ordinary human. Modalism explains the Triune as

⁶ Brian Boley, *What Do Evangelical Christians Believe?: Understanding Evangelical Christianity by Dispelling Common Myths*, (Ohio: Oddparts Press, 2007).

⁷ Ans Joachim van der Bent, *Historical Dictionary of Ecumenical Christianity*, (London: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1994).

⁸ Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007), p.20.

three separate modes which God uses, and Arianism's supposition was that like adoptionism, Jesus was created and was indeed God's first creation. Arianism would not falter from the opinion that nothing can be like God, as God 'was' and was not created. She also explains the nature of the Trinity, by referencing Jesus' baptism, informing us that God The Father, God The Son, and the Holy Spirit 'is' the one true God. She mentions some metaphors in relation to the 'three' and shows how they fail when understanding The Holy Trinity. Perhaps a more suitable metaphor can be found in the science of water, which can be liquid, ice and steam, but still remain water. In this third chapter, the author provides insight into the confusion surrounding the Trinity and explains how to view these as one.

A Delightful World takes on the task of explaining how God created the world and all things within it. At first consideration, we may believe that extreme faith is needed to believe this to be true, especially with what science reports to us as fact. However, this may be where science and faith are not so different. As the author describes, the world being created through God's word. Taken literally, this might be difficult to digest, but even science and also other religions discuss the ability of sound and vibration having the means to manifest matter^{9;10}, so is this another example of God providing simplistic explanation in his revelations?

The next chapter explains theological anthropology and is described by the author in terms of humanity being created in God's image. She makes an interesting point which ties into the explanation of the Trinity when she reminds us that God bore human form in Jesus. The doctrine described in this chapter shows us the possibilities of being one with God, just as Jesus is. Another interesting proposal is explaining humans as 'middle creatures', living in both mind and body, not of spirit alone, not of the physical alone; this also points to the potential for humanity to become triunistic once we become one with God.¹¹ There follows a discussion of humanity being born into sin as a result of the 'fall', and suggests that even if we live a righteous life we still remain in sin collectively. This poses the question of 'where is the hope if we are born sinners', which she answers by explaining that Jesus is our salvation from sin which can be attained through faith.

Chapters six and seven are dedicated to discussing Jesus, both as a man and as God and the Holy Spirit. She talks of the heresies regarding this (of which there are many) but helps the reader to see the connection between the divine and the human nature of Jesus, and how God sent Jesus to help us navigate our way to God. She explains that God presented a human form for us to better understand how we should live as humans, yet maintained the divine aspect as exemplified in the miracles he performed. She explains 'contrition' and 'repentance' for the sins we chose to commit, but also helps us understand that salvation comes only through faith and

⁹ Gyo Takeda, ed., *Development of Physics: Encyclopaedia of Life Support Systems*, (Oxford: Eolss Publishers Co. Ltd., 2009).

¹⁰ Padma Aon Prakasha, *The Science of Sound: The Four Modes of Vibration*, (Hampshire: John Hunt Publishing, 2024).

¹¹ William Rounseville Alger, *A Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life: With a Complete Bibliography of the Subject*, (Philadelphia: G.W. Childs, 1864).

not just righting our wrongs. The concept of 'final redemption' through salvation the author discusses navigates back to the understanding that this salvation is not for our acts on earth, but is eternal, and saves us from the sin we were born with. The concept of sin is its association with being against or in opposition to someone which causes harm, and it is the harm against God, through our innate sin that the author is describing.

In chapters eight and nine the author discusses The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life, and One Church in a Diverse World. The author talks about the different perspectives on what 'spirit' means and makes a bold statement that Gnosticism is a lie; and that you can not be spiritual without remaining religious. She explains that the premise for understanding The Holy Spirit lays not from within, and that Spirit is instead afforded to us through God and laid upon us; therefore, without God we cannot know Spirit. She further explains that although The Holy Spirit works amongst all, God allows the Holy Spirit to reside within the Church permanently. The oneness of God is then discussed in relation to the diverse practices within Christianity; whether different denominations, cultural differences which can sometimes dictate how doctrine is followed, or community values. Considering all the possible differences, she explains that as humans who interpret scripture, we can often get things wrong, which in turn trickles down into the Church which may sometimes seem to fail. Constant within this however, is God's grace, and in his grace gives concession and understanding. By reminding us that God is within us all, the author provides clarity to what can be a very complicated discussion.

The closing chapter of the book discusses God's plan for the future and the reason for creation. In contrast to the other chapters, it discusses, hope and fulfilment of God's promises to us. Maintaining faith in our modern age, when all around us seems to be falling apart; we are reminded here of Jesus' messages to us, informing us not to be afraid, as these things need to happen in order to allow for the new creation through resurrection.

To end the book the author has included 'A Prayer for the Practice of Christian Doctrine' which is a fitting conclusion.

It is clear from the way the author has written this book that her framework of belief is Evangelism, often discussing 'sin' and how we need to follow doctrine in order to combat that which is innate. For the reader with good understanding of scripture this would be understood, on the other hand, for someone who has newly found faith, it may be difficult to digest. The author has balanced any bias with examples of opposing views, considerations and arguments from a vast range of resources. She has included key scripture to assist with understanding, accounts of how Christianity has been contemplated over time and posed questions for the reader to contemplate. This is an excellent resource in the importance of scripture and following the doctrine therein.

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