

# Theological Anthropology and Relationality: A Promising Exploration By LeRon Shults

Paul Lewis

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*In Reforming Theological Anthropology, F. LeRon Shults draws from work on relationality in other disciplines to suggest ways in which theological anthropology might profitably be reformulated. While the task is worthwhile, the method promising and the results suggestive, much fine-tuning remains to be done. Paul Lewis review is followed by a brief response from F. LeRon Shults*

F. LeRon Shults. *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003. Pp. xiv + 264. ISBN: 0-8028-4887-7. \$35.00, paper.

In his own words, Shults essays to provide a “programmatically outline” for “reconstructing the doctrines of human nature, sin and the image of God in light of the challenges of late modernity” (xii). The specific challenge of late modernity that occupies Shults’ attention is that of the philosophical turn to relationality. Given this shift, Shults contends that “late modern theological anthropology must take into account not only our psychological and social relations to other persons but also the physical and cultural relations that compose the matrices within which our lives are dynamically embedded” (p. 2). Shults rightly hopes that this newfound interest in relationality may help theologians revise existing doctrinal formulations and recover biblical insights that have been obscured by a substance metaphysic.

Shults devotes the first chapter of the book to describing the turn to relationality. He does so by tracing two epochs in philosophical reflection, the first of which begins with Aristotle and ends with Kant, who paves the way for later revision. To make a long story too short, in this period, thinkers define what an object is in terms of its substance or essence rather than by its relationship to other particulars. In the second epoch, which Shults traces from Hegel to Levinas, philosophers, in varying ways to be sure, argue that we cannot understand a thing without understanding it in relation to other things.

After describing recent attention given to relationality, the book proceeds in three steps. The first puts theology in conversation with developmental psychology (Chs. 2 and 3), as well as philosophy and cultural anthropology (Ch. 4). Along the way, Shults makes some important observations about the perils and promises of engaging interdisciplinary interaction. For example, with explicit reference to the work of Michael Polanyi and psychologist Robert Kegan, Shults correctly insists that participants enter the dialog from their own fiduciary structures, that might be traditionalist, modernist or postmodernist (Ch. 2). Further, different disciplines may well understand a term in different ways (e.g., “fear;” see Ch. 3).

If the first part of the book is devoted to an exercise in interdisciplinary discussion, the second takes on a more decidedly theological focus in that these chapters (5-7) are devoted to historical theology. In this part of the book, Shults offers careful and sympathetic exposition of how relationality functions in several modern

Reformed theologians, notably Schleiermacher, Barth and Pannenberg. Not content to show that relationality, albeit differently understood by different thinkers, never really disappeared in Christian thought, Shults also makes the case that relationality is central to ancient debates over how best to understand and articulate the relationship between Christ's two natures.

In the final section of the book, Shults turns to (re)constructive theology proper. He suggests how work in biblical studies, philosophy and neurobiology can help us understand human nature is distinct from that of other animals without getting into problems raised by attributing that distinctiveness to either different substances or a unique faculty psychology (Ch. 8). He offers a relational understanding of sin based largely on a historical deconstruction of Augustine's view, supplemented with insights from biblical scholarship, the natural sciences and philosophy (Ch. 9). Shults concludes with a reconstruction of the *imago dei*, again based largely on historical analysis and changing currents in philosophy and theology (Ch. 10).

There is much to commend in the book, not least of which is Shults' recognition that the Christian tradition is a living tradition, rather than a static one. Faithfulness in theology, for Shults, means engaging in the same kind of task today in our context as our predecessors did in theirs, *not* repeating the conclusions and words of earlier generations. Shults thereby provides a counterpoint to those postmodern theologies that simply stress remaining faithful to a community's traditions. Put differently, because remaining faithful to the mission and vision of the community's past generations requires being responsive to present intellectual currents, theology must be interdisciplinary in character. Another strength of the book lies in the ease and clarity with which Shults negotiates complex philosophical and theological discussions, placing them in historical context.

While individual chapters shine, the whole adds up to less than the sum of its parts. The book reads more like a set of collected essays that have a loose thematic connection than a single argument. For example, it is not clear how Part III (the constructive work) builds on and connects with Part I (that discusses, for example, various fiduciary structures), or exactly how Part II advances interdisciplinary work. In addition, if the book is about reforming doctrine faithfully in light of new insights from other disciplines, it would be helpful if Shults was more explicit and effusive about the criteria he uses for determining what insights to appropriate and/or discard from, for example, neurobiology. In addition, I find some surprising gaps in the analyses of different thinkers. For example, in his discussion of reason, will and affections (Chapter 8), Shults ignores the role that one's loves or affections play in Augustine's anthropology, or Thomas' "Treatise on the Passions." I also find it surprising that a work self-consciously set as one in Reformed theology does not draw from Jonathan Edwards' rich discussion of human psychology in *Religious Affections*. While such a criticism may seem a bit unfair, the author does discuss Edwards at other points. It therefore seems odd that Edwards does not appear here (or, for that matter, why Edwards' second dissertation, *The End for Which God Created the World*, is missing from the discussion of God's glory found in chapter 9). Finally, the language of the text is sometimes jarringly jargonistic, as post-modern writing all-too often is.

To say all this is not to minimize the value of the book. There is much to be learned from individual portions. Perhaps most importantly, we can be reminded of how theology works, for here we have an example of someone doing theology in a way that is honest about how theology proceeds and clear on how open it must necessarily be to what we can learn from the perspectives of others. That the work has its flaws perhaps speaks more to the difficulty and complexity of the task as anything else.

# Author's Comment

**F. LeRon Shults**

First, I want to thank Paul Lewis for his kind review of my book *Reforming Theological Anthropology* and the editors for the opportunity to respond. Lewis' summary of the book is concise and accurate, and I was pleased to find another colleague who is enthusiastic about reconstructing Christian theology in general, and about engaging late modern culture and the turn to relationality in particular. His review is so positive that I was tempted not to respond at all. However, I would like to make a few brief points. First, the critical comments at the end were not really about material issues or the argument itself, but "book review" criticisms; he is right that it "seems unfair" to criticize a book for not including this or that favorite issue of the reviewer. No book can include everything. Second, he notes critically that the chapters seem to be a set of collected essays; in the preface I explained that in fact most of the early chapters had been previously published and were re-worked for this project as illustrations of interdisciplinary work that takes seriously the theme of relationality in anthropology. He does not give any examples of "jargon," so I am not able to respond to that concern. Finally, I also mentioned in the preface that the Anthropology book has a companion volume which is in process: "Reforming Theology: Late Modern Trajectories in the Doctrine of God." Lewis will be pleased to hear that I treat Edwards in more detail there; I'm sure other gaps will be found, but my hope is that together these books will contribute to the ongoing task of theology, which is indeed both difficult and complex, but also a joy.