

*Imagining Redemption.* By David H. Kelsey. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005. 108 pages. \$19.95.

With characteristic clarity, David Kelsey sets out to shed some light on what Christians mean when they speak of redemption. His approach involves reflection upon a series of tragic events in the life of a young boy and his family. The summer of his eighth year, Sam suddenly falls ill with a rare form of viral paralysis. After months in a coma, he is discovered to have endured subtle forms of brain damage that leave him learning disabled and relationally impaired. Kelsey charts the long and at times devastating aftermath of this tragedy with restraint, candor, and insight. He seeks to explore redemption through a carefully framed question: “What earthly difference can Jesus make here?” In the process of supplying a powerful and nuanced answer, he also advances a promising proposal for theological method at the intersection of practical and systematic theology—an approach he dubs “systematically unsystematic” theology.

Kelsey’s theology is practical because he “presuppose[s] a community of persons who engage in practices in which they already do use ‘redemption’ Christianly and...want to be clearer about what it means to speak that way” (22). Redemption is not an abstraction—not a clear and distinct theological idea unsullied by the absurdities of life and generically serviceable for any number of situational applications. Rather, the Christian meaning of redemption is varied like the spectrum of actual situations that cry out for God’s help. Understanding what counts as “typically Christian talk about redemption” is not only a matter of consulting the tradition, but also always grows out of a dialogue between the tradition and a concrete situation thickly described in relation to its several contexts.

Drawing on the work of Garrett Green (*Imagining God*), Kelsey chooses imagination as the category of cognition most appropriate to such complexity. For Kelsey, imagination is the capacity to discern a pattern in a vast array of data and so to gather it up into some kind of intelligible whole. We are able to lay hold of the intricacies of God’s involvement in actual situations by theological

imagination—imagination trained by the patterns established in scripture. For the Christian, to imagine a situation as redeemed by God is not wishful invention, but a bid to grasp faithfully an interaction of staggering complexity.

Of course, systematic considerations also inform Kelsey’s approach. In framing the issue, he distinguishes between redemption from evil committed (“atonement”) and redemption from evil endured (“eschatology”). While acknowledging that these two kinds of evil have a way of becoming enmeshed with each other in our lives, he chooses to focus his analysis upon the latter. Systematic concerns also shape every part of the meticulously worded question (i.e., “What earthly difference can Jesus make here?”) that guides and constrains his argument. In this way, we never lose sight of Kelsey’s conviction that “whatever might be said about redemption must cohere with beliefs about grace, incarnation, human nature, atonement, eschatology, and history” (93). Perhaps most importantly, Kelsey’s instincts as a systematician help him to navigate the hazards of engaging in careful theological analysis in relation to the palpable details of such an arresting and emotionally intense situation. He refuses to indulge the temptation to make a narrative art of his enterprise. There is no dramatic climax here, no satisfying denouement. “We are trying to think carefully and faithfully about redemption here,” Kelsey seems to say, “not telling an engaging story.” *Imagining Redemption* reads like contextually sensitive theology, not journalism.

Systematic theologians familiar with Kelsey’s Yale context will not be surprised to find his approach singularly christological. The identity of Jesus rendered in the gospels exclusively drives this account of redemption. Practical theologians may wonder that the church’s traditional practices receive so little attention—surprisingly little even for so brief a work as this. Never mind. This book is profoundly and beautifully argued, showing the way forward for theological reflection that takes seriously both the actual life of the church and careful systematic reflection upon its tradition. It will richly reward close reading.

Lance Pape  
Emory University