

**Ben WITHERINGTON, III. *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism and Wesleyanism*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005. 294 pp. \$29.95.**

As heirs of the Protestant Reformation, contemporary Evangelicalism (including the Stone-Campbell Movement) has long cherished one of the battle cries of the Reformers: “*Sola scriptura*.” On the other hand, a second defining Reformation slogan has often been curiously neglected: specifically, the call to be continually involved in the reforming *process*—*semper reformanda*. This failure has often precluded Reformation and Restoration descendants from advancing beyond the initial biblical insights of their respective founders and caused theological and denominational failure and allegiances to calcify and become resistant to healthy correction.

Stone-Campbell scholars have long faulted their fellow Protestants for ignoring the prominence that the NT gives to the “sacraments”—baptism and the Lord’s Supper—preferring to relegate these to a Zwinglian-like symbolism that all but separates their practice from “faith.” However, to the movement’s credit, the Campbells and Barton Stone were not content with simply accepting the prevailing Protestant understandings of these important NT rites. It might be argued that the Stone-Campbell Movement was a long-awaited renewal of the spirit of *semper reformanda*. Recently, however, Reformed theologians such as Kevin Vanhoozer have been challenging their peers to allow biblical and canonical theology to set their theological paradigms, and the next decade should see the appearance of several significant works on theology that make the biblical narrative the mediator of theological conclusions rather than the predetermined teachings of systematic theology. In other words, Calvin’s venerable *Institutes* could actually be read in terms of “theological pilgrimage” instead of as the “final word.” Rather than pursuing their respective crafts in isolation, OT and NT scholars and their counterparts in systematics are now joining forces in a long overdue interdisciplinary manner.

Some scholars are already on the cutting edge of bringing systematics under the governing authority of Scripture, notable among them Ben Witherington, III, from Asbury Seminary. In an earlier volume on christology, *The Many Faces of Christ* (Crossroad/Herder, 1998), Witherington proposed that a chronological examination of the NT documents yielded a portrait of Jesus that not only was the foundation for the historic creedal formulations but actually surpassed these confessions due to a stunning variety of christological images. What emerges from the study of the text is not an easily stated, “monochromatic” picture of Jesus (3). Instead, one encounters the God-Man in “many faces;” unified, but in a less-than-systematic way. Witherington reminds us that liberal theology does not have a lock on theological reductionism.

In his most recent effort, Witherington advances his critique of Evangelical “Bible-binding” by taking Calvinism, Dispensationalism, and his own Wesleyan tradition to exegetical task. In essence, each one of these prominent definitions of Evangelical theology errs most in the key doctrinal commitments that distinguishes it from its other family members. Regarding Calvinism, Witherington notes: “Reformed exegetes have a hard time coming to grips with the paradox of a God who is both sovereign and free. . . . They have a hard time understanding that holy love does not involve determinism, however subtle. . . . They have a hard time dealing with the idea that God programmed into the system a certain amount of indeterminacy, risk, and freedom. And maybe . . . the good old Evangelical lust for certainty leads us all to too quickly fill in gaps and silences of Scripture, driving us to bad exegesis” (5). From this provocative statement, the author begins his “assault” upon the biblical fidelity of Calvinistic interpretations of total depravity, “bondage of the will” (as explained by both Augustine and Luther, especially from Romans 7), and election, playfully heading these chapters with titles like “O Adam, Where Art Thou?” and “Awaiting the Election Results.” His analysis of Romans 7 and the definition of “election” that emerges from a biblical theology are particularly insightful.

However, Calvinism receives relatively light chastisement in comparison to Dispensationalism. Sparked by the generally uncritical reception of the LaHaye–Jenkins’ *Left Behind* series, Witherington launches into a full-scale critique of this popular approach to Scripture by taking on its most hallowed shibboleths: the nature of biblical prophecy, the rapture, and LaHaye’s interpretation of the relationship that exists between Israel and the church. He comments: “Of the three theological systems we are examining in this volume, Dispensationalism is in fact the new kid on the block, and it is clearly the most exegetically problematic as well” (93). To contemporary evangelicals supporting Israeli aggression by appealing to an alleged fulfillment of biblical prophecy, Witherington offers this admonition: “According to the book of Revelation only God is the proper executor of justice and final judgment on the world, not human beings. Revelation is about the most

antimilitaristic book in the Bible as it never once encourages any human, never mind Christians, to take up arms. Rather it encourages them to pray and be spiritually prepared to suffer for their faith. . . . The author (John) would find shameful; the way this book has been used in the *Left Behind* series and by many of the televangelists” (166). In sharp contrast to Dispensationalism’s preoccupation with Israel (and the USA) and a twenty-first-century unfolding of world events, the author reminds his readers that “from a Christian point of view, all OT promises and prophecies are to be fulfilled in or by Christ, not apart from Christ and/or the church” (109).

Yet Witherington’s own Wesleyan tradition is not without its exegetical faults. While the author is undoubtedly more charitable to John Wesley than to Augustine, Luther, or Darby, he nonetheless criticizes Methodism’s founder at the points most associated with Wesleyan theology, notably entire sanctification and prevenient grace. Of the former, he notes: “The problem with Wesley’s analysis is that sometimes he defined sin too narrowly, as simply the willful violation of a known law, and thus saw perfection as the avoidance of that coupled with the experience and expression of holy love. But this definition of perfection does not include being conformed to Christ in his sufferings and death, much less being made like Christ in his resurrection. But that is what Paul says real perfection—full perfection—amounts to” (215). And concerning the latter, Witherington admits that “Wesley’s theology of prevenient grace is frankly weakly grounded if we are talking about proof texts from the Bible. . . . I would prefer to say (from scripture) that sinners are enabled by grace, in the moment of crisis and crying out, to respond to the gospel” (209). In addition to these critiques of John Wesley, Witherington offers a word of caution about the dangers of “experiential exegesis” that is now best seen in today’s major Wesleyan–Arminian offshoot, namely the Pentecostal Holiness or Charismatic movement. While he commends this fast-growing evangelical wing for its important recovery of pneumatology, he also challenges the biblical and theological legitimacy of its interpretation of and emphasis upon tongues and the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” (218-222).

Given the scope and breadth of Witherington’s indictments, adherents to the Stone-Campbell Movement might well feel a bit left out, since many in scholarly circles have come to the conclusion that we have contributed our own, distinctive problems to evangelical theology, such as failing to articulate a coherent theology. On the other hand, we could take a certain amount of pleasure in the fact that such a preeminent scholar is calling for theological construction in a manner reminiscent of the Stone-Campbell Movement. Maybe the Restoration has a hermeneutic that can correct the problem Witherington observes.

Witherington concludes by calling attention to how theology was done in the first-century world, namely by Jesus and Paul. Those familiar with Witherington’s writing will not be surprised to see attention given to “Jesus the Sage and the Storyteller,” or to “Paul the Rhetorician” (231-235). In a manner that should well resonate with postmodern affections for narrative, readers are reminded that Jesus, Paul, John, and the rest all did their theology in a “storied universe” (230). Thus, along with its firm scriptural foundations, biblical theology makes sense for evangelistic reasons. On top of that, it holds the promise of transcending denominational and party lines, bringing together the church universal. Restoration founders had a vision like that.

This volume has become a favorite of mine. I have recommended it to many of my colleagues, and I heretofore unabashedly recommend it to *SCJ* readers. This volume has given me a renewed appreciation for our Restoration Plea and its great hermeneutical and ecclesiastical potential. And it has chastened me to not only champion the authority of Scripture alone but to continually allow that holy book to reform my theology.

*Semper reformanda!*

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