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Christ and Culture Revisited



## BOOK REVIEWS

***The Method of Christian Theology: A Basic Introduction.* By Rhyne R. Putnam. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2021, xvii+336 pp., \$22.99.**

In *The Method of Christian Theology: A Basic Introduction*, Rhyne Putnam gives readers a method of theology that takes Christian formation and discipleship seriously as its primary goal. Putnam notes the rationale for understanding theological method: “We are rich with information but poor in wisdom” (p. 3). In our technologically saturated culture, the need for ascertaining wisdom is greater than ever. But this wisdom, as Putnam contends, should lead to a great passion for the Lord, his mission, and to be “more effective disciple-makers in the various ministry contexts to which God calls us” (p. 4). Putnam accomplishes this goal with this volume and has produced a vital resource for students of theology, whether in the academy or the church.

Divided in four parts, *The Method of Christian Theology* walks readers through what Putnam identifies as the principles (part 1), preparations (part 2), procedures (part 3), and practices (part 4) of Christian theology. Thus, Putnam writes with the novice in mind. The principles of theological method (part 1) include defining theology and the various disciplines within theological studies. Here Putnam defines the task of theology for the sake of Christian formation and discipleship. Putnam asserts, “Well-crafted doctrine faithful to the message of Scripture changes the whole disciple” (p. 44).

In the preparations for doing theology (part 2), Putnam sheds light on both the affective and cognitive aspects of doing theology. Here Putnam advocates for a “gentle theology” that is not about people-pleasing, but about sharing truth in love (pp. 96–7). Alongside this gentle theology, the theologian should be one who embraces a “faith seeking understanding” posture first postulated by Augustine of Hippo (354–430) and later emphasized by Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033–1109). Putnam notes, “We can *embrace* the Christian worldview in faith and still seek to *understand*

it with our God-given powers of reason” (p. 109; emphasis original).

In parts 3 and 4, Putnam presents the mechanics of doing theology. Part 3 presents readers with how theology is done through study in the Scriptures, reflection upon tradition, conversing with philosophy, and understanding the proper role of experience. This section concludes in chapter 11 with a twelve-step procedure for studying theology that moves from the study of the biblical text, through the study of tradition, into the ways in which doctrine affects the heart. Thus, the twelve-step process seeks to take the study of theology into the life of worship and discipleship. The final section of Putnam’s work provides guidance on developing theological writing both for the academy and the church. Whether writing a research paper or a sermon, Putnam demonstrates the vitality of theological method for building up disciples of Christ. While helping readers with an introductory approach to theological method, Putnam continually reminds readers of the proper aim of theological method: more effective and meaningful Christian discipleship.

Others have presented introductory works in theological method for readers. Glenn Kreider and Michael Svigel’s *A Practical Primer on Theological Method: Table Manners for Discussing God, His Works, and His Ways* (Zondervan Academic, 2019) and Mary Veeneman’s *Introducing Theological Method: A Survey of Contemporary Theologians and Approaches* (Baker Academic, 2017) are both excellent introductory works, but they presuppose some basic theological training. *The Method of Christian Theology*, thus, fills a need for an introductory text with the new student of theology in mind. It also fills a gap for a book on theological method that is easily accessible to the Christian layperson.

Putnam’s hope is to present doctrine for discipleship. He is clear in his directives and encouragement towards the task of doing theology. Most appreciated is his mindfulness of the beginning reader by the way he highlights necessary terms and compiles them at the end of each chapter. Along the way he is not afraid to engage with critical voices as well as friends of the faith. This book empowers rather than overwhelms the new student of theology. While the work is aimed at new students of theology, it could easily be read by interested Christian laypersons, and even serve as a text for a theological training program in the local church. If theology is

for the heart as well as the head, then Putnam's work gives readers exactly what they need to begin their journey.

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***The Child is Father of the Man: C. H. Spurgeon.* By Tom Nettles. Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2021, 230 pp., paperback, \$14.99.**

Tom Nettles, already a noted Spurgeon biographer, offers a fresh and scintillating perspective on this Baptist legend. Nettles is senior professor of historical theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The book's title and premise derive from William Wordsworth's *My Heart Leaps Up* revealing that people's personalities develop as children, and they show those same qualities as adults. Nettles develops ten specific Spurgeon convictions, "Issues that appeared early in [his] life, made their way in his ministry through the years, and stayed with him until death" (p. 213). Nettles intends this book to be a companion to his biographic magnum opus *Living by Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Christian Focus, 2013).

Nettles sees providence as the bedrock of Spurgeon's convictions for he viewed everything through the lens of the divine purpose and gaged his internal and external response based on biblical doctrine (p. 19). Indeed, the doctrines of grace undergirded his spiritual convictions, proving a bulwark of security in all of Spurgeon's life and ministry challenges from conversion to death (p. 36). Spurgeon felt strongly about being a Baptist. Regenerate church membership had thrust him into Baptist life (p. 59), and he believed that Baptists held a deposit of sacred truth to defend, and one should not hesitate to battle for it (p. 72). After conversion, Spurgeon's early *evangelistic desire* led him to seek the salvation of his younger brother and throughout his life he believed the sole directive of the church and the minister was the winning of souls (p. 96).

While most are privy to Spurgeon's "tendency to despondency" (p. 120), some may lack clarity as to where he found relief. The Bible was as "an abiding source of tonic against depression" (p. 120) and Jesus was

his balm for depression, for in Christ “he found a fellow-sufferer of more deep physical suffering and more poignant troubles of soul” (p. 216). Spurgeon displayed an early bent toward transparency and commitment to self-analysis. Reading Spurgeon, one quickly becomes aware of his thoughts on personal experience (p. 143), thinking of himself as somewhat of a human paradigm (p. 216). God would use this conviction for the benefit of both his servant and those to whom he would minister (p. 144). From the onset of his walk with the Lord, Spurgeon felt a deep sense to contend for the faith. He believed that every minister who distanced himself from this “contending” would be responsible to God for the souls of men (p. 180). His contentions were not simply doctrinal, they were against the “coldness and the lethargy of the times” (p. 162). His was a deep conviction concerning slander. Nettles supplies a theology of slander in his study, where Spurgeon reveals how criticism gives opportunity to magnify God’s grace (p. 186).

The two best chapters (4 and 10) deal with Spurgeon’s convictions about preaching and his commitment to the Scriptures. Watching his father and grandfather prepare to preach, he knew early on “he could watch, but he must not talk or distract in any way, because faithfulness to God’s glory and the souls of men was at stake in the spiritual sensitivity which gave birth to a sermon” (p. 21). For him, preaching was art and science, but primarily a passionate overflow of the person and work of Christ (p. 215) and if exposition did not end in the cross of Christ, then true exposition had not occurred (p. 91). Nettles points out that his unshakable faith in the infallibility of Scripture was foundational to every Spurgeon sermon, book, ministry endeavor and controversy in which he engaged (p. 218). For Spurgeon, “[Inspiration] is the Thermopylae of Christendom. The entire battle for truth turns on it” (p. 198).

I find no downside to this book whatsoever. Nettles performs a service to both the church and the minister through his continued writing. This volume well serves those interested in preaching, ministry, Baptist life, or church history. Spurgeon was an excellent example of convictional steadfastness, who displayed many honorable characteristics that were noticeable throughout his pilgrimage (p. 19). May we similarly find courage in our

convictions that will carry us through to final breath.

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***The Person of Christ: An Introduction.* By Stephen J. Wellum.  
 Wheaton: Crossway, 2021, 206pp., \$18.99.**

Stephen Wellum introduces this book with the shocking results of a 2018 poll conducted among evangelicals by Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research. When asked, 78 percent of polled evangelicals surprisingly agreed with the following statement: “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.” Similarly, 51 percent agreed with this statement: “God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam” (p. 15). Appreciating the serious implications of misunderstanding who Jesus is for the evangelical community, Wellum states: “My goal is to equip the church to know the basic biblical teaching about who Jesus is and how the church has theologically confessed the identity of Jesus throughout the ages” (p. 16).

Knowing that a faithful biblical Christology can only be accomplished within the Christian worldview and the Bible’s clear teachings, Wellum finds his theological method not in a Christology *from below* but in a Christology *from above* whose interpretation and formulation stem from a “presuppositional nexus of philosophical and theological commitments” (pp. 23–24).

In chapters two and three, Wellum begins to unfold the identity of Christ from the Bible’s covenantal storyline. God as the Triune Creator and covenant Lord provides the interpretive framework for Scripture, which establishes Christ’s identity (p. 38). With the picture of the cooperating work of the Trinity presented in Scripture, the identity of Jesus, through both implicit and explicit witness, is revealed as God the Son. In particular, the well-known New Testament passages regarding Christ’s deity clearly point to his incarnational sonship (e.g., John 1:1–18; Matt 1:18–25; Col 1:15–20; Phil 2:6–11; and Heb 1:1–4; pp. 65–82).

Christological heresies played a significant part in church history, causing

the church to clarify the orthodox teaching of who Jesus is. Those present at the Council of Nicaea (325) debated the issues related to Trinitarian and christological orthodoxy, preserving the full deity of the Son and the eternal personal distinction of the Son from the Father. The Council of Chalcedon (451) had to deal with further discussion regarding the nature of the incarnation (pp. 96-97). The kernel of the debate at Chalcedon had to do with the distinction between Christ's person (*hypostasis*) and nature (*ousia*). With Christ's full deity and full humanity defended, the Chalcedonian Creed clarified that in Jesus Christ "the two natures subsist in the one person who acts fully through both of them but not contrary to either nature" (p. 106).

Next, Wellum expands his work to present several post-Chalcedonian clarifications regarding Christ: (1) the hypostatic union; (2) the *communicatio idiomatum*; and (3) dyothelitism. Did the human person of the Son replace the divine person in the incarnation? The hypostatic union affirms that the Son did not assume "the full existing individual man, that is, a human person and nature," rather he assumed the human nature and added it to his person (p. 110). Were these two natures intermingled or mixed in one person? Wellum helps readers understand they were not. The doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* ("the communication of attributes") means that "the attributes of each nature are 'communicated' not to the natures but to the person of the Son" (p. 116). Thus, these two natures had two wills in the one person of Jesus the Son (i.e., dyothelitism). In relation to the soteriology, Wellum says that Jesus' human will was critical to bring salvation to man, quoting the maxim of Gregory of Nazianzus, "What is not assumed is not healed" (p. 123). Finally, regarding the divine attributes of the Son in the incarnation, Wellum appeals to Colossians 1:17 and Hebrews 1:3 to show that the post-Chalcedonian development affirmed that Jesus had divine attributes, which continued to be exercised by the Trinitarian Son (p. 119).

An additional challenge to christological orthodoxy appeared in the name of Kenoticism, which argued that "the Son freely and temporarily gave up his accidental attributes" (p. 130). Against this view, however, Wellum contends that Christ retained all that is essential to deity. This challenge involves a wrong concept of "person," which needs to be understood as "a subsistent relation, a subject who acts in and through a nature," not as "a distinct center of knowledge, will, and action" (pp. 130, 137). Wellum concludes by giving a kind and well-organized summary regarding

Jesus as God the Son incarnate.

I highly recommend this book because (1) it helps contemporary evangelicals get back to our christological senses; (2) it balances biblical and rich theological content; and (3) it clearly articulates the truth that Jesus is Lord!

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***Pastoral Theology in the Baptist Tradition: Distinctives and Direction for the Contemporary Church.* By R. Robert Creech. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021, xii+259pp., \$26.99.**

R. Robert Creech puts his study and experience to work in writing *Pastoral Theology in the Baptist Tradition*.

In the Introduction, he states that the lack of studies on pastoral theology from a Baptist perspective was the motivation for writing the book. The book contains twelve chapters divided into four parts. Creech explores the topic of each chapter biblically, historically, and theologically. Finally, using James McClendon's Baptist vision of "this is that," Creech hopes to discover, describe, and transform the beliefs and practices of Baptist pastors.

Part one deals with "Becoming a Pastor." First, he notes that whereas the New Testament uses elder, bishop, and pastor interchangeably, more Baptists have favored the term pastor because of its relational connotations. Second, just as the prophets and apostles were called of God, Baptists have held a clear sense of the pastoral call as a marker of God's activity in the pastor's life. Third, Creech contends that Baptists have emphasized ordination as a component of pastoral ministry but have barely articulated a theology for it. To conclude this part, Creech posits that the Bible is equivocal on women in the ministry and admits that historically, Baptists have favored only men as pastors with a few exceptions. Theologically, Creech attempts to argue that women and men can serve as pastors and preachers by appealing to the priesthood of believers and the local church's autonomy as his grounds.

Part two deals with the pastor's proclamation. He observes that Baptists



have viewed the preaching ministry no differently from the biblical prophets and apostles. He notes that preaching is sacramental as God takes over the physical activity. Akin to this, Creech notes that Baptist pastoral ministry involves an evangelistic “sentness” to the world.

In part three, Creech deals with priestly acts that characterize Baptist pastoral ministry, providing Scriptures and Baptist history to justify his claim. First, Baptist pastors are to administer baptism and the Lord’s Supper, both priestly acts instituted by Christ. Also, they minister priestly care to God’s flock, an action rooted in Scripture and distinct from modern-day psychology. Lastly, Creech notes that at their best, Baptist pastors have been known for the priestly function of making disciples through the commanded means of teaching.

Creech explores pastoral leadership in the final part, examining pastoral authority, shared leadership, and vision casting. He posits that the Bible describes pastoral authority as delegated authority channeled through servant leadership. He notes that Baptists discuss pastoral authority relating it to the interrelationship of ordination and the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. With a clear biblical vision for a shared ministry and the priesthood of all believers, which implies the inherent ministry of every believer, Creech bemoans “clergification” and the marginalization of the laity in Baptist life. Finally, Creech identifies the pastor’s duty to lead the church to discern God’s vision and keep alive hope for God’s promised future.

Robert Creech does several things well in this book. First, his attempt at filling a void is praiseworthy. While the topics he discusses may lend themselves to other traditions, Creech does well to tether these topics to a Baptist worldview. The reader will find the historical sketches included in the book helpful.

Having said the above, a book covering issues of this magnitude cannot but have tension points. Creech’s inclusion of a chapter on “Women in Ministry” is admirable. However, to what kind of Baptist is Creech writing? Southern Baptists? American Baptists? Or Baptists globally? Again, the basis for his egalitarian conclusions lies in the priesthood of all believers. Does the priesthood of all believers equal the “preacherhood” of all believers? Furthermore, if the church is to mirror the family structure as the New Testament describes, should that not inform an understanding of 1 Tim 2:11–13?

A couple of things also beg the question in Creech’s discussion on the

ordinances. He suggests, for example, that the disciples on the road to Emmaus were a couple, but he does not provide any argument to support this claim (p. 150). Furthermore, Creech observes that Baptists have failed to reflect on baptism from which their name is derived (p. 145), a point unjustifiable in light of the publication of Thomas Schreiner and Shawn Wright's book *Believer's Baptism: The Covenant Sign of the New Age in Christ* (2007).

Notwithstanding, Creech's work is a solid beginning for a pastoral theology in the Baptist tradition.

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***God Has Chosen: The Doctrine of Election Through Christian History.*  
By Mark R. Lindsay. Downers Grove: IVP, 2020, xii+236pp., \$30.00.**

Mark R. Lindsay, who has wrestled with the doctrine of election for years, sheds light on the topic by examining both Scripture and the work of theologians throughout Christian history. His effort highlights the historical context of the doctrine by focusing primarily on the “understanding of the being of God rather than the destinies of people” (p. 7).

Beginning with the biblical concept of election in the first chapter, Lindsay emphasizes God's relationship with his people when it comes to the connotative terms “to choose,” “knowing,” and “calling” (p. 16). These terms portray a God who not only initiates relationship with people but vitalizes the dynamic inclusivity of the relationship (p. 17). The first passage highlighting this characteristic of God is found in Genesis 12:1–9, which is amplified in other biblical passages such as Genesis 32, Deuteronomy 7, Romans 9, and Ephesians 1:3–14. God acts freely in election without regard for any merit in man as he embraces peoples and nations. This, says Lindsay, is a pattern of God's working for “an expansive inclusivity that extends even to the most unlikely and alien” (p. 35).

From chapter two to the end of the book, Lindsay develops the understanding of the doctrine of election chronologically from the Church Fathers through the Middle Ages and Reformation period, and on to the

neo-orthodox thinkers of the twentieth century, focusing on key theologians of each era.

Lindsay presents four key Fathers in relation to the doctrine of election: Ignatius of Antioch, Origen of Alexandria, Cyprian of Carthage, and Augustine of Hippo (pp. 51–71). One noteworthy feature during this period lies in the way election is grounded in the nature of the church as the visible substance of the elect community (pp. 39–45). For example, Augustine believed the church to be a mixed community in which the “twofold possibility of election and condemnation” coexist because of the grace of God, not because of God’s lack of foreknowledge (p. 69).

Contrary to the ecclesiological orientation of the doctrine found in the Fathers, Lindsay observes that two medieval thinkers, Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus, articulated the doctrine of election with reference to their imperial context (that is, their political theology; p. 75). Providing an overlapping role between church and state, medieval Christianity gave the perception that “being a ‘good believer’ in one was virtually synonymous with being a ‘good citizen’ in the other” (p. 103).

John Calvin, Lindsey’s representative of the doctrine of election in the Reformation era, is famous for making this doctrine explicit in his Institutes. However, as Francois Wendel mentions, the importance of the doctrine of election for Calvin is with “ecclesial politics and pastoral observations” (p. 108). What is critical in Calvin’s conviction about this doctrine, says Lindsay, is that “the eternal decision of God remains rightly veiled from our minds, a veiling that leaves us free to rejoice in our election and so, in our lives, to follow Christ in peaceful assurance” (p. 115).

After the Enlightenment, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Barth appear on the stage with their own interpretations of the doctrine. It seems appropriate to say the doctrine of election was reevaluated in Schleiermacher. His appeal to the *singularity* of God’s decree asserts, “It is not to be conceded that there is a divided revelation of divine attributes... Instead, justice and mercy must not be exclusive of each other” (p. 150). As for Karl Barth, it is well-known that he accepts Christology as the fountainhead of the knowledge of the electing God. Lindsay points to 1936 as the beginning of Barth’s thought on the concept of christological election, when he heard a lecture on “Election and Faith” by French pastor Pierre Maury (p. 167). Barth identifies Christ as the subject of election, which indicates election is intrinsic to God’s being and a “part of the very doctrine of God itself” (p. 171).

Lindsay surveys the doctrine of election by visiting key theologians in their own historical context. By doing so, he helps readers approach the doctrine of election through the lens of history. I gladly recommend this book to those who desire with humble minds to participate in the mysterious but glorious work of God.

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***Lifting the Veil: Imagination and the Kingdom of God.* By Malcolm Guite. Baltimore, MD: Square Halo Books, 2021, 111pp., \$18.99.**

Malcolm Guite is a rare combination—accomplished poet, Anglican priest, brilliant academic, and popular lecturer. In addition to recently publishing a collection of original sonnets on the Psalms (*David's Crown: Sounding the Psalms*), he has penned this work on imagination and the kingdom of God which originated in a lecture series he delivered at Regent College in 2019.

Guite's purpose is clearly stated: "This book is a defense of the imagination as a truth-bearing faculty, and more than that it is an appeal to artists, poets, sculptors, storytellers, and filmmakers to kindle our imaginations for Christ..." (p. 11). Thus, the book serves as both an apologetic for the imagination itself and an appeal to other artists to make use of their own imaginations. On both fronts, it succeeds.

In the opening chapter, Guite utilizes helpful quotes from figures such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shakespeare, and C. S. Lewis to demonstrate why the imagination should be trusted as a truth-bearing faculty. First, he explains how imagination helps to remove "the film of familiarity" from us so that we can see truth we might otherwise miss. In this way, imagination empowers the arts to fulfill its intended purpose, which is to provide us with unexpected ways of glimpsing and telling the truth. Second, he reminds us that reason and imagination are both valid modes of knowing and learning truth, diverse modes which find their reconciliation and harmony in Jesus Christ. Third, he argues that imagination helps us apprehend the hidden realities of the invisible world beyond those realities merely discerned in

the visible. And fourth, he points out that Jesus unashamedly appeals to the imagination in his teaching, proving that “made up,” “fictional,” and imaginative stories can still teach profound truth.

The next three chapters detail three aspects of the imagination: the poetic, the moral, and the prophetic. In chapter two, “Christ and the Artistic Imagination,” Guite explores different ways that poets can “usher us further into the mystery of three essential truths about Christ: his Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection.” Drawing on Scripture, his own poetry, and the poetry of others, he shows how the poetic imagination clarifies, and even intensifies, our view of Christ. In chapter three, “Christ and the Moral Imagination,” Guite highlights the teaching of Christ, giving specific attention to the parables of the grain of wheat and that of the Good Samaritan. These parables appeal to the moral imagination, which he defines as “that exercise of imagination which enables you to stand in another person’s shoes...to imagine and even re-imagine the world from their perspective.” In chapter four, “Christ and the Prophetic Imagination,” Guite discusses how Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom is both a prophetic critique of this world and a prophetic call to hope and action.

Throughout the book, Guite seeks to stir the imagination of other artists in hopes that they will respond to his appeal to make art for the sake of Christ. Thus, the book is one-part permission and one-part motivation. His defense of the imagination gives artists permission to use their creative gifts to proclaim the faith without feeling that they must apologize or justify their validity. Embedded in the book is also a wealth of motivation geared to kindle a burning desire in artists to use their imaginations to help us see Christ and his kingdom more clearly. Theologically speaking, Guite motivates artists via three doctrinal realities: (1) imagination is part of the image of God in us; (2) the mystery of the incarnation makes the imaginative arts possible and meaningful; and (3) in Christ our imaginations have been renewed. Artistically speaking, Guite motivates by including numerous poems, paintings, drawings, and woodcuts throughout his work. He also explains the creative process behind some of his own poetry and encourages artists to go out and make new stories which are capable of embodying truth.

While the value of a work like this may seem obvious to right-brained “creative types,” I hope it finds a wide reading among left-brained “logical types,” too. Theologians and poets need to be in conversation for the good of the church, and Malcolm Guite serves as a stimulating conversation

partner toward this end. As he himself reminds us, “When we seek to enter into the mystery of our faith we must call the poets to the table as well as the theologians.”

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***Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope.* By Esau McCaulley. Downers Grove: IVP, 2020, 198pp., \$14.89.**

In *Reading While Black*, Esau McCaulley, who is assistant professor of New Testament at Wheaton College and an ordained Anglican, speaks aloud for the edification of modern Black Christians. The book is a combination of genres: hermeneutics, spiritual autobiography, and applied systematic theology. In it, McCaulley argues “that the Black ecclesial tradition...has a distinctive message of hope arising from its reading of biblical texts” (p. 164). His aim is to share this hermeneutic arising from this community.

*Reading While Black* contains seven chapters, a conclusion, and a helpful “bonus track.” Chapter one, “The South got Somethin’ to Say,” theologially situates the Black ecclesial hermeneutic, one that is “formed by the faith found in the foundational and ongoing doctrinal commitments, sermons, public witness, and ethos of the Black church” (pp. 4–5). Here McCaulley describes how this hermeneutic was “*canonical* from its inception” and “unabashedly *theological*” (p. 19). Chapter two develops a biblical theology of policing based on Romans 13:1–7 in light of the larger canon, leading the reader to understand that “the Christian’s first responsibility is to make sure that those who direct the sword in our culture direct that sword in ways keeping with our values” (p. 39).

Chapter three describes the “New Testament and the Political Witness of the Church” (p. 47) by beginning with Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” McCaulley rightfully notes that King’s ministerial detractors were “focused more on law and order than the demands of the gospel” (p. 48). Chapter four analyzes the pursuit of justice in the

New Testament, as especially seen in Luke-Acts.

Chapter five asks readers to consider Black identity as presented in the Bible itself. McCaulley explores this with relation to Abraham, Manasseh and Ephraim, David, Jesus, Simon of Cyrene, and the Ethiopian eunuch. He then robustly states, “Colorblindness is sub-biblical and falls short of the glory of God. What is it that unites this diversity? It is not cultural assimilation, but the fact that we worship the Lamb” (p. 116). Chapter six describes the struggle with “Black rage” at exploitative whites and sinful African Americans (p. 120). He calls upon persons feeling this rage “to develop a theological imagination within which we can see the world as a community and not a collection of hostilities. It does so by giving us the vision of a person who can heal our wounds and dismantle our hostilities” (p. 129).

Chapter seven describes a biblical theology of slavery and an accompanying hermeneutic of hope arising from both the biblical text and the life of Christian African Americans. Here, the Exodus serves as a hermeneutical key to the Bible. “Slavery is a manifestation of the fall,” McCaulley observes, “and God begins the story of Israel by freeing them from slavery as a symbol of hope. My ancestors read it that way and so do I” (p. 151). The “Bonus Track” surveys the “history of Black biblical interpretation” (p. 168) and is worth the price of the book.

*Reading While Black* is a thought-provoking book. It is thoroughly researched by an expert in the field, and the author writes with a tremendous amount of humility. Ultimately, it allows the attentive reader, who is not native to the Black ecclesial tradition, to have their eyes opened to the beauty of seeing Jesus as “the person who can heal our wounds and dismantle our hostilities” (p. 129).

The book does have a few drawbacks. The relative paucity of sources throughout the book is problematic. Often the reader is left to trust McCaulley that the black ecclesial tradition he speaks of is as described (p. 171). Also, more epistemological humility might be warranted, as when the author seems to speak out of what is often called class warfare when he describes “families living in luxury knowing that this wealth is bought with the price of their suffering” (p. 123).

It seems to this reviewer that the true genius of books like this lies in

the way they allow readers to see biblical themes endemic to the text in a fresh way, themes that they might not have seen without the benefit of a hermeneutical aid. While it is not a perfect book, *Reading While Black* does faithfully allow readers to hear from God's Word clearly.

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***Interpreting Jesus: Essays on the Gospels.* By N. T. Wright. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020, 368pp., \$52.99.**

N. T. Wright is a popular speaker, respected New Testament scholar, engaging writer, and prolific author having written over eighty books—an almost impossible combination. Equally rare are his voluminous contributions to two major fields: Pauline Studies and Gospel Studies. Having served as an Anglican bishop, he is currently senior research professor at Wycliffe Hall at the University of Oxford.

*Interpreting Jesus: Essays on the Gospels* is the second volume of a three-volume set, *The Collected Essays of N. T. Wright*. The other two volumes are *Interpreting Scripture: Essays on the Bible and Hermeneutics* and *Interpreting Paul: Essays on the Apostle and His Letters*. Each book contains journal articles and book essays that span almost forty years in Wright's impressive writing career.

The seventeen articles in this volume appear in chronological order from 1982–2020, and each essay has a short introduction providing helpful background and contextual information. The introductions show: (1) helpful connections leading up to some of Wright's major books, such as *Jesus and the Victory of God* (pp. 66, 81) and *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (p. 116); (2) interactions with writings of other major scholars (e.g., B. F. Meyer, p. 128, Richard Hays, pp. 188, 221, 243); and (3) important links with various lecture series Wright has delivered (p. 280).

There is much to like in these essays which are vintage Wright. First, his engaging writing style is a pleasure to read. Second, he is erudite without being unclear—an intelligible intellectual. These two points are likely related to his extensive experience as a pastor (pp. 154–58, 161). Third,



Wright usually deals kindly with scholars with whom he disagrees, such as Bultmann (p. 151). Fourth, some of his criticisms are particularly memorable. Referring to the Jesus Seminar's unwarranted anti-historical bias, he said "criticizing 'history' because of the Jesus Seminar is like warning against air-travel because of Icarus (p. 81)." Sometimes his comparisons are enjoyably naughty: "Ben F. Meyer, who has more understanding of how ancient texts work in his little finger than many of the Jesus Seminar seem to have in their entire word-processors (p. 85)." Fifth, Wright consistently affirms the historical content of the Gospels (pp. 31–32, 154, 160). Sixth, he gives good reasons for rejecting additional "gospels" and accepting only the four canonical Gospels (pp. 174, 198). Seventh, he is thought provoking and willing to go against the grain of NT scholarship, such as interpreting "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31) as being both "the satan *and* Caesar"<sup>1</sup> (p. 218; emphasis in the original). Eighth, he continually pushes scholarship forward to new, potentially fruitful areas of study (pp. 180–87).

Even with the helpful explanations prior to each essay, it is still sometimes unclear when they were written. That information is found in the "Acknowledgements" (pp. 329–30), but it would be more helpful were they found in the introductions at the beginning of each chapter. Additionally, a subject index would be helpful. Other points of criticisms are of a theological nature and aimed at information found in the articles. First, calling Genesis 1–2 "mythological" is problematic regardless how one defines the word and has problematic connotations (p. 23). Second, criticizing fundamentalism and the religious right is fashionable in scholarly writings but too often is painted with a broad brush (pp. 144–45) and deserves a more nuanced approach. Third, although the call for balance between a theology of cross and kingdom has merit, downplaying the use of the cross and resurrection to prove Jesus' divinity is problematic (pp. 160, 182, 186). Fourth, Wright's emphasis on the Jewishness of the Gospels is well founded, but the claim that Jesus summed up Israel in himself (pp. 34–36, 167) seems a bridge too far. Fifth, Wright interprets passages about Jesus' *parousia* (Mark 13:26; 14:62) as referring to Jesus' vindication as Israel's representative (p. 29). Yet, Jesus' second coming is the more likely interpretation. *Maranatha!*

Students and scholars alike will find *Interpreting Jesus* an enlightening

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<sup>1</sup>Wright prefers to use the term "the satan" (212, 218); whereas this reviewer prefers to use the name "Satan" in reference to God's enemy (John 13:27).

read of some thought-provoking essays. Wright's contribution to NT scholarship is impressive and his impact is undeniable.

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***The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship.* By Robert Letham. Revised and Expanded Edition. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2019, 696pp., \$29.99.**

Letham's recent book, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship*, is a revised and expanded work of the same title (2004). This new edition maintains the same clear structure of the previous edition, dividing the book into four parts: Biblical Foundations, Historical Development, Modern Discussion, and Critical Issues. In Part 1 "Biblical Foundations," Letham examines the biblical evidence about the Trinity, focusing on the Son and the Spirit. The excursus "Ternary Patterns in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians" discusses the triadic pattern demonstrated in this letter. Part 2 "Historical Development" provides a chronological sketch of the development of the doctrine. Here, Letham covers important historical periods and figures including early trinitarianism, the Arian controversy, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, the Council of Constantinople, Augustine, the *filioque* controversy, the divergence between East and West, and John Calvin. Part 3 "Modern Discussion" examines the trinitarian thought of modern theologians such as Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenburg, Sergius Bulgakov, Vladimir Lossky, Dumitru Staniloae, and Thomas F. Torrance. Part 4 discusses some critical issues that Letham deems important such as the Trinity and the incarnation, the relations between the Trinity, worship, prayer, creation, and missions, and the concept of persons in the Trinity. Chapter 17 "The Trinity and the Incarnation" is one place where Letham substantially revised the earlier edition of this book.

Letham is to be commended for the way he sketches the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. The historical survey provides a comprehensive guide that is accessible to novices. However, as meticulous as Letham

is, he misses a recent update that affects his argument. On page xxxii, Letham remarks that “Leading evangelicals have recently questioned or abandoned the classic doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and the one indivisible will,” and he then proceeds to list Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware as opponents of eternal generation. However, both scholars recently changed their position and have embraced this doctrine, a point they made public at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in 2016.<sup>2</sup> Ware also clarified his position of the distinct wills at this meeting. Letham’s presentation, in short, is out of date and does not accurately reflect recent developments in this debate.

Besides this oversight, I wish that Letham would have reorganized the first part “Biblical Foundations.” Although it is rich in content, unfortunately, the first part is not organized in a coherent way. The sections read like expanded dictionary entries that are only loosely connected. Moreover, Letham sometimes rushes to a conclusion without providing sufficient evidence for it. For example, while mentioning John 14:28, Letham says, “This is *evidently* a reference to his [Christ’s] incarnation.” (p. 29) He provides no exegetical or historical evidence for this conclusion, nor does he guide readers through his process of deduction. Inserting the word “evidently” will not do the job.<sup>3</sup>

Letham does an excellent job of presenting the historical development of the Trinity (Part 2). In Part 3 “Modern Discussions,” he captures the main themes of each modern trinitarian theologian’s thoughts, interacts with them, and evaluates their theologies in a judicious way. The reader will benefit tremendously from these two parts. However, due to the loose structure of Part 1 “Biblical Foundations,” and some of its rushed conclusions, the reader may want to consult other resources for a clear presentation of the biblical evidence for the Trinity. Because some of the information in Part 4 “Critical Issues” is outdated, the reader is encouraged

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<sup>2</sup>See details in Hongyi Yang, *A Development, Not a Departure: The Lacunae in the Debate of the Doctrine of the Trinity and Gender Roles* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2018), 191–94.

<sup>3</sup>See a more detailed exegesis and discussion of the interpretation of John 14:28 in Yang, *A Development, Not a Departure*, 285–96. Briefly, there are two major traditions of interpreting John 14:28. The majority of the early church fathers (Tertullian, Novatian, Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Hilary of Poitiers, Marius Victorinus, and possibly John Chrysostom) interpret this verse from the perspective of the eternal Father-Son relationship. Letham’s view belongs to the other tradition (represented by Cyril of Alexandria, Theodore, Ambrose, and Augustine) that uses the two-nature exegesis.

to read this part critically.

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***The Federal Theology of Jonathan Edwards: An Exegetical Perspective.*  
By Gilsun Ryu. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021, xvi+352 pp.,  
\$29.99.**

In his book *The Federal Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, Gilsun Ryu has admirably tackled one of the more neglected areas of research in Edwards studies: Edwards’s federalism or covenant theology. Ryu does not just provide readers with a detailed account of Edwards’s federal schema—encompassing his theology of the covenants of redemption, works, and grace—he also situates this theology in the context of his reformed scholastic predecessors and thoroughly explores the ways Edwards exegetically supported his views. The result is a study that unites several current subdisciplines within Edwards’s studies: Edwards’s relationship with his reformed predecessors, studies on Edwards’s exegesis, and Edwards’s federalism. Ryu’s work is important because he suggests that the fundamental framework of Edwards’s approach to the Bible lies at the intersection of his understanding of the history of redemption and his federalism.

The book orbits around three concepts: Edwards’s reformed federalism, his understanding of the history of redemption, and his understanding of the unity of the Bible. Until recently, scholarship on Edwards’s doctrine of the covenants has emphasized his divergence from the reformed tradition. This older scholarship, Ryu observes, was misinformed primarily because the rich variety of approaches to covenant theology among Edwards’s predecessors was not fully appreciated. Federal theology among the reformed, Ryu notes, is not “a specific method or set of ideas,” but rather “a family of approaches” to understanding the Bible that rejected a Pelagian view of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments (p. 71), and broadly affirmed some version of the covenants of redemption, works, and grace. Looked at from this broad vantage point, the family semblance between the reformed tradition and Edwards’s covenantal scheme becomes

immediately apparent, even if we find Edwards deviating from his reformed predecessors on a number of minor points. In arguing this, Ryu helpfully devotes a chapter to the federal theologies of four seventeenth-century reformed theologians—Johannes Cocceius, Herman Witsius, Petrus van Mastricht, and Francis Turretin—in an effort both to show the diversity of the federal system and Edwards’s relatively close association with it.

Ryu next explores Edwards’s doctrines of the covenants of redemption, works, and grace in chapters three to five, respectively. His burden in these chapters is to demonstrate that salvation history (or “the history of redemption”) was prominent in Edwards’s mind as he articulated these doctrines. For instance, Edwards’s doctrines of the immanent Trinity and the covenant of redemption were specifically forged with the history of redemption in mind: “the redemptive work of God,” Ryu concludes, “has its seminal form within the immanent Trinity” (p. 103). Noteworthy in these chapters is Ryu’s lengthy study of Edwards’s doctrine of the covenant of works (chapter four), a topic that has rarely been examined in the secondary literature.

In chapters six through eight, Ryu details the exegetical strategies Edwards employed in constructing his theology of the covenants. Here the author dives deep into Edwards’s hermeneutics. While Edwards began with the literal-historical meaning of the text, he was not adverse to drawing upon typology, the literal-prophetic sense of texts, and even allegory to illuminate Scripture’s meaning. Edwards could thus see multiple dimensions to a biblical figure like Moses: “Moses could be understood as a real figure, a type of the church under the Mosaic era, a type of the soul of the elect, and a type of Christ being humiliated” (p. 255). Governing these forays into the fuller sense of Scripture is Edwards’s commitment to the unity of Bible, a unity that is christologically-focused, is framed by the history of redemption, and is guided by covenant theology.

The book is well-written and thoroughly researched. My one critique is that it can at times be rather dense, no doubt the result of the fact that it originated as a doctoral dissertation. Yet careful reading will, however, yield great rewards in understanding Edwards, federal theology, and the Bible.

It is well-known that several months before his unexpected death, Edwards wrote of his intent to author two “great works” on the Bible: *A History of the Work of Redemption*, and *The Harmony of the Old and New Testament*. Scholars have since theorized what these writings might have contained. Ryu’s book is, in my estimation, the best study so far pointing

to what these works might have looked like.

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