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Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity (Book Review)

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**Book Reviews**


Reading Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen’s *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story* is like entering a promised land of milk and honey. *The Drama of Scripture* is an extraordinarily good book. It is a book that can be reliably recommended to those wondering “what’s the Bible all about?” and to those new to the faith, while seasoned veterans will derive encouragement and depth from page after page. The authors have drunk from the wells of the redemptive-historical tradition of biblical understanding. They stand in the line of S. G. De Graaf’s, *Promise and Deliverance* (1971-81), but this is no mere update and rework. The text is keen and fresh.

In discussing the “biblical drama,” the authors have drawn on the “five act structure” familiar to readers of N. T. Wright and have amplified this somewhat at Act 5, “Spreading the News of the King,” and by adding Act 6, “The Return of the King” (Bartholomew and Goheen, 26-7, cf. 21). [For N. T. Wright’s most recent formulation, see his *The Last Word* (2003), 121-7]. In this respect, Bartholomew and Goheen are on solid ground, in my judgment. For centuries, the notion that “Christians go to heaven” has re-enforced a “world-flight” mentality, whereas the Bible clearly teaches that at the renewal of all things, the dwelling place of the Creator Redeemer is with His people in a cosmic setting (211-13). Although not a work of heavy scholarship, the easy-to-read prose is nevertheless the fruit of extensive learning and mature reflection.

Some problems remain. In a society threatened with *jihad*, more surely needs to be said about the violence (even genocide) of the Hebrew entry into the land of promise (77-85). Our authors have not skirted this issue, but it cries out for a more stringent treatment. Of course, part of the answer is that we derive our difficulties from biblical teaching itself. The clear and thoroughly sound intention of the authors is to enable us to place ourselves in the wider biblical story. In line with this purpose, they take time out from the actual biblical narrative to draw cameo pictures of contemporary Christian discipleship (202-5). I found these depictions to be both interesting and encouraging. Yet I also experienced the transition from Paul and Barnabas (187-96, 200-1) to the post-apostolic church (202) to be deeply disturbing. The problem is that once we enter into the post-apostolic life of God’s people, we must confront the question of apostasy. We need to address the process whereby “the Way” became the tool of empire; and we need some insight into how the Christian religion came to take on certain of the more egregious practices of Islam, such as so-called “holy war,” slavery, and genocide. Why has Christianity so often sided with repression—sometimes with churchmen fighting to retain their coercive powers until the very last moment? We are not permitted to excuse problems because they are inconvenient. Of course, great men such as Wilberforce struggled mightily in the cause of abolition, but sheer honesty demands that we recognize how much Christianity was previously involved in extending such a dreadful evil. And then there is the question of Christian anti-Semitism in all its hideous forms. It is a legitimate question: “If this is the true faith, how is it capable of distortions that have resulted in such human suffering?”

Of course, Bartholomew and Goheen are not purporting to offer us a comprehensive church history, and it would be unfair to criticize them for failing to have done so. Yet they have written for first-year undergraduates specifically (11), many of whom barely possess sufficient knowledge to have such questions come to mind; a failure to recognize their strength will not impress. These caveats notwithstanding, this is a very fine book. It should be recommended to all undergraduates and to all those wanting to know what the Bible is all about. It is clear and positive, and should help to deliver some of those who are enslaved by millennial fantasies. The authors have placed us all in their debt. Their work deserves to remain in print for a long time and is strongly recommended.


The idea of “reformation” is still with us— as powerful and as suggestive as ever. A while ago I discussed in these pages (*Pro Rege*, September 2002) the standpoint adopted by the authors of *Whatever Happened to the Reformation?*
They would have us, in some sense, “go back” to “the reformation.” Now, in Carl Raschke’s The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity, we have a very different book indeed.

Raschke’s thesis is stated in his subtitle: evangelicalism must embrace the “postmodern.” Raschke refers to the reformation, specifically Luther, but only in the course of arguing this thesis. Moreover, it soon becomes clear that for Raschke, much post-reformation Protestantism partakes of the “modernism” that must be forsaken. Raschke teaches in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Denver, Colorado. His is a checkered past, as far as denominational affiliation is concerned. For some, its diverse range will perhaps bespeak the free-floating variegatedness that is one of the hallmarks of the postmodern condition (Raschke 7-8). And Raschke has drunk deeply from the ever-suggestive wells of postmodern and related thinkers. Baudrillard (92-3, 146-9), Caputo (112-14), Heidegger (77-82), Lévinas (118-20), Nietzsche (41-8), Mark Taylor (86-92), and especially Deleuze (60-8) and Derrida (48-60, 82-6) all figure prominently in this work. If Raschke’s argument ultimately fails to convince this reviewer, it is not for want of his valuable, close reading of these authors or for his critique of the leading features of modernism.

So what is Raschke’s problem with modernism? How are we to view evangelicalism’s habitual relationship to modernism, and why must it change? Why is Evangelicalism viewed as being ultimately consistent with “postmodernity”? And how does contemporary Calvinism fit into the picture? What is Raschke advocating, and why?

Raschke advances a fairly conventional “postmodern” critique of modernism, although this critique must definitely not be confused with older conservative evangelical critiques of theological liberals. Modernism is driven and controlled by the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Evangelical anti-liberalism should not fool us here because in their characteristic outlooks, both liberalism and fundamentalism have absorbed more of the assumptions of the Enlightenment, with its rational foundationalism, than most evangelicals appreciate (140f.). Where evangelicals offer critiques of postmodernism, aligning themselves with contemporary neo-conservatism, they tend to unintentionally mimic recent “modernist” liberalism, adopting a pro-objectivist posture (12).

Yet, at the same time, the pragmatic and opportunistic side of evangelicalism absorbs the mores of postmodernity, even while criticizing its sideling of “objective truth” and “rationality” (15, cf. 92-5). Evangelicals see the latter as having to be preserved, for the sake of the gospel, even though postmodernism breaks with an exclusive commitment to scientific rationality that Raschke believes evangelicals should find acceptable (18). In his view, “the theme of subjective truth, properly understood, has been far more congenial to the gospel throughout the ages than any canon of propositional certitude” (19). He insists that evangelicalism should adopt a postmodern stance in order to sever its long-stand-
tion of evangelicalism therein. Rather, he draws inspiration from his personal appropriation of Martin Luther. Luther is Raschke’s hero (70). Indeed, for a Reformed reader, Raschke’s appropriation and utilization of Luther is highly instructive. His call for “the next reformation” is to be understood in terms of his reading and appropriation of Luther’s critique of the Catholicism of his day. Luther is “postmodern” in his emphasis on faith, over and against (modernistic) rationality and culture (26-7). Only after the Reformation did Protestantism (and with it evangelicalism) slide back to rationality, not least by way of John Locke and Thomas Read (27-31, 76). For Raschke, therefore, evangelicalism, reflecting its Lutheran lineage, is not intrinsically modern. Neither is evangelicalism to be confused with fundamentalism, with which it has become entangled since the nineteenth-century (33). The true Geist of the reformation was that of “religious postmodernism” (110-1, cf. 127-9).

In all of this we may discern some serious problems. I will mention two briefly. Firstly, Raschke casts Luther as offering an anti-modern “reformation” critique in his day (37). There seems to be something anachronistic about this. Raschke’s Luther is just too deeply adverse to the via moderna of his day (111, cf. 210), and he cites Alister McGrath and Heiko Oberman to this effect (220, endnotes 13 and 14). This is certainly consistent with Raschke’s argument, but it is too much of an oversimplification of the carefully drawn lines of Oberman’s discussions. Here the reader should consult Oberman’s Masters of the Reformation (1981, 71-110), The Dawn of the Reformation (1986, 52-83), and Luther: Man Between God and the Devil (1992, 119-125). Raschke frames Oberman’s representation of Luther to suit his own latter-day argument.

Secondly, for Raschke: “The Next Reformation will be about faith, and faith alone. Here we stand. We can do nothing else.” (98). Mention of Luther repeatedly prompts expressions of fideism; with “faith” positioned over against “reason” (114-5). It is hard not to see in this a reflection of the old pietist habit of putting “heart” over against “head.” Driven, it would appear, by the postmodern spirit, Raschke is willing to opt for forms of irrationalism in the name of faith – as in his championship of Charles G. Finney (159-160). Consequently, Raschke’s postmodern appropriation of Luther leaves him highly ambivalent about a Christian world-view. He definitely prefers H. Richard Niebuhr’s “Christ the transformer of culture” model over against the “Christ against culture” alternative, in which he discerns the resonance of modernist, Baconian pre-millennialism (165). However, to articulate what Christ the transformer of culture entails for our discipleship would seem to require the kind of world-view that his anti-modernism resists. Such problems point to inner inconsistencies deep in the structure of Raschke’s thinking. For him, “theologies of glory”—be they reformed-scholastic, commonsense-realist, rational-foundationalist or presuppositionalist—all exhibit the hubris of assuming that the right formulation “is sufficient for understanding God.” (110). True, all such intellec-
thought (74-5, cf. 37-40), yet few would doubt his enlightenment credentials. Raschke notes that the church of modernity is a managed church, and contrasts this with charismatic Christianity as “thoroughly postmodern” (157). I know what he means when he talks about “managed” churches, yet charismatic congregations can be, in their own manner, as “managed” as any others. Again, Raschke may indeed warn evangelical churches committed to modernity that we marry the spirit of the times at the risk of widowhood (20), but where will his post “next reformation” churches be as postmodernity itself fades?

By privileging much under the rubric of “postmodernity,” Raschke exempts a great deal that should come under loving critique. The problem is not that Raschke is radical: it is that he is not radical enough. Certainly, theology itself can function as a graven image. After scholasticism we may well say with Raschke, “After theology we must all get on our faces” (215), although I am inclined to add, “After modernism (including postmodernism) we must all get on our faces.” But, of course, Jesus never leaves us in the dust, on our faces. He brings us to our feet and says, “Follow me.” Raschke does not say enough about all that this entails.


I recall sitting many years ago in Westminster Chapel, London, listening to Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) preach repeatedly from the Pauline epistles: “Now is the righteousness of God revealed apart from the law.” “By grace you are saved … it is the gift of God.” “There is therefore no condemnation …” It was as if hundreds of years of a certain kind of Protestantism, (not least Reformed and Puritan Protestantism) were compressed and coiled up within a stupendous flow of impassioned advocacy. In its way it was impressive and yet also problematic. At that stage in my life, I was only beginning to think historically—and struggling to do so in a biblically directed way, as I still am. Yet even as “the Doctor’s” exposition unfolded with persuasive rhetoric and architectonic grandeur, I recall thinking, “Did Paul really think like this?” “Did Paul think in the way that evangelicals believe Luther thought?” “Did a latter day pietistic Puritanism really reflect the cast of Paul’s mind and the scope of his authorial intentions?”

Now we have before us a very different kind of Paul from that offered by the Welsh Calvinistic Methodism of Lloyd Jones and the Puritan commentaries that he studied so assiduously. In the publisher’s blurb, J. Richard Middleton alludes to Karl Adam’s famous description of Barth’s Römerbrief (1919) as falling “like a bomb on the playground of the theologians.” Certainly, Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire will come as a disconcerting challenge to those used to a Paul construed and appropriated for the purposes of rational theologizing and pious devotions.

Walsh and Keesmaat seek to speak to a generation who are frequently wary and often offended by the “absolute” tone of scriptural discourse and who, when confronted by its all-encompassing certitude, feel that they are in the presence of a kind of fascism (15 f., 152). They argue that the Bible has become, in a sense, misplaced in our contemporary church and culture (18-19), out of synch with postmodern syncretism (25). I think I prefer hypermodernity to postmodernity, but we are certainly being confronted with a dissolving of boundaries on a global scale (31-3). Now it seems that all else must dissolve before the overarching hegemony of U.S.-led and U.S.-protected global corporate capitalism (35-7). This is the modern version of the “empire” that is now subject to the subversive solvent of the gospel. Of course, we have always known that at Colossians 2:15 Paul refers to a Roman triumph, but Walsh and Keesmaat refuse to see this only as the drawing of an analogy for the depiction of what is only an inner spiritual reality. Rather, they rightly insist that the gospel—Paul’s “my gospel”—stands ultimately to bring to nothing every pagan and apostate tendency—“principalities and powers”—animating human life and culture.

In order to heighten this pivotal point, our authors boldly offer a targum of their own, which challenges the presumed hegemony of contemporary global corporate capitalism (39-48, cf. 137-9). In this, they re-apply (“remix”) the message of Colossians to our time in a manner reflective of the targum drawn of old in order to re-interpret the law for the benefit of Jews exiled in the alien circumstances of the Babylonian exile. By this means, they assert the compatibility of first-century pagan Rome and twenty-first-century, U.S.-led corporate capitalism (49 f.). Indeed, they draw some telling cross-comparisons (58 f.). The Pax Americana of today is as self-serving and no more truly peaceful than was the Pax Romana of old (61-5). Paul’s language is repeatedly subversive of the empire of Caesar. The empire in our age aspires to “the complete marketization of all of life and every corner of the globe.” (155). The authors are very explicit about this view because they “aren’t so sure the church would get it” (93). The stark truth is that the church has found ways of reading the Bible that leave the “principalities and powers” unchallenged (94-5). This is a reality that must be confronted, and this reality explains why we never heard anything like this targum in Westminster Chapel.

Walsh and Keesmaat are right in insisting that we read...