
Pro Rege

Volume 34 | Number 4

Article 5

June 2006

Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire (Book Review)

Keith C. Sewell

Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Sewell, Keith C. (2006) "Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 34: No. 4, 35 - 37.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol34/iss4/5

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

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.

Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire, by Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004, ISBN: 0-8308-2738-2, 256 pp. incl. bibliography. Reviewed by Dr. Keith C. Sewell, Chair of the History Department and Professor of History, Dordt College.

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,¹ 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 (61-3). 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

Colossians as a world-view expressive text. The all-encompassing claims of the risen Christ confront and refute the totalitarian claims of empire (98 f.). Yet it is at exactly this point that they must address the “postmodern” aversion to all forms of totalization. Here we return to the theme of the ultimate tenor and tone of scripture, which among so many invokes fears of spiritual fascism—or at least authoritarianism. The all-encompassing character of the biblical drama provides no escape. The response of our authors is to emphasize the inclusive and all-reconciling deliverance wrought by Christ on the cross. In this context they reject classical modernist notions of objectivity (118 f.) and affirm “that creation is an eloquent gift of extravagant love” (123). However, I am not clear that they (or anyone) can offer this confession in a way that some “postmoderns” will not experience as an oppressive narrative. If in our discourse we position ourselves within the frameworks of typical styles of postmodern self-understanding, we seem to become mired in relativism, notwithstanding our best intentions (127-8). Modernist objectivity and postmodernist subjectivity fail us.

It appears that we cannot be without a narrative. Like Bartholomew and Goheen (*The Drama of Scripture*, 2004), Walsh and Keesmaat offer an overview of the biblical “metanarrative” based on that offered by N. T. Wright (133-5), and here, in the midst of another *targum*, they rightly state that “the postmodern vision of a laid-back pluralism will not suffice” (138). All of this entails a profound re-orientation, a turning away from idols (139 f.). Christ’s present-day disciples need to grasp that “they have *already* been raised with Christ, they have *already* died to the empire, but their life has already been hidden in Christ and has *not yet* been revealed” (155). Christ, not Caesar (or the US President, or Microsoft) is Lord (177).

Therefore, we Christ-followers are called to a very different kind of communal concern and action in public, economic, and social life generally (180 f.). The ecological implications are profound (193 f.). The authors call for an “ethic of secession” that, though not Anabaptist-style withdrawal (155, 160, cf. 185-8), implies a markedly different kind of dissenting Christian community from what many of us have experienced in contemporary churchly contexts (159-168). And so it is that we must wrestle with our “already but not yet” positioning in the biblically revealed drama (201 f.), and not without suffering either (220 f.). Secession should not result in withdrawal but in repositioning for the purposes of reformation. I wonder where the author’s “ethic of secession” will leave many readers. Paul was ready to invoke his Roman citizenship (by birth, not purchase) for the sake of the gospel (Acts 22: 25-8).

So what about the US citizens who read this book, not least those in its armed forces, or who sit on boards in business corporations mandated to maximize shareholder return by seeking out the cheapest labor across the globe? There are massive issues here, calling for the kind of across-the-board reflection that our circumstances and

individualistic proclivities so often seem to preclude.

Certainly, American evangelicals (be they more or less fundamentalist) need to be challenged as to their allegiances. We cannot serve God and the empire; we cannot fear the LORD and prostrate ourselves before the vagaries of “the market” at the same time. And, yes, it was no part of “Paul’s gospel” that we should live an inner life of devotion to Jesus while publicly subscribing to the system. But there are, I suspect, some traps and snares in the approach of Walsh and Keesmaat. Offering explanations for their proffered *targums* can function as a vehicle for demonstrating how saturated in the Old Testament Paul’s thinking was. But are these *targums* the best means of elucidating the meanings of the text for the twenty-first century? Might not this produce a “Pandora’s box” situation, in which we are assailed with a multiplicity of *targums* from all sides? These might not be as well thought-out as those of Walsh and Keesmaat. Those who have taken offense at what will be perceived as a “left-wing anti-American bias” in these authors could offer their alternative *targums*. The contemporary *targum*, as a literary device, is probably best done once and then left in abeyance. And I remain unconvinced as to the coherence of the modernist/postmodernism disjunction. This surely needs to be re-thought in terms of a contemporary *hypermodernity*. I find myself understanding “the postmodern” as a shift *within* the dominant modernistic world order, not as indicating its passing.

These reservations notwithstanding, Walsh and Keesmaat have issued here a formidable challenge that spiritual integrity and intellectual honesty will not allow us to evade. The implications are immense. They rightly observe that in times past, God’s people have succumbed to the seductions of empire (67 f.). Their reference point is the Old Testament. Nevertheless, I can imagine their postmodern interlocutors asking them why, if Paul’s gospel was so good and true and liberating, Christianity itself (in the era of “Christendom” and beyond) became the justification for empire and vast engines of enslavement and oppression. Our historical track record is hardly exemplary. How come the truth faith can be distorted thus? Where do Constantine and Theodosius fit into this? Some would tell us that they Christianized the empire; but was not their actual “achievement” to render Christianity both “imperious” and “imperial”? The Kingdom of God came to be equated with the *regime*. We now find ourselves groaning under the weight of our own history, which includes the crusades, the inquisitions, slavery, anti-Semitism and apartheid. The Christian “metanarrative” does not exclude the sins of “Christendom.”

In the light of what Walsh and Keesmaat have argued, a case can be made for saying that we desperately need a stunningly rigorous and truly Christian historiography of the Christian Church (which is not the kind of thing that we are likely to get from denominational seminaries). It is time to be relentlessly self-critical. Indeed, within the fabric of their exposition, there is here an implied call for some-

thing that reformational thinkers in North America once touched upon but that for the long time they have seemed to evade: the reformation of the (institutional) church in our time. Can the new wine that Walsh and Keesmaat are offering be dispensed from our present ecclesiastical wine-skins? Certainly, it is hard not to see our present system of parallel Protestant denominations (like rival corporate entities competing for the ecclesiastical market share) as itself being under judgment. For us the writing is on the wall. A very great deal of Bible-believing Christianity in the west (or what lies beyond the west and is influenced by the west) is profoundly complicit with the imperial-corporate culture that Walsh and Keesmaat describe. And the *hubris* of this culture is repeatedly exhibited in its arrant presumption that the earth and the fullness thereof be-

longs to us—especially “us” in the shape of business corporations—and that we can do pretty much what we like with it with impunity. The truth is that we can’t and that the cosmos belongs to Jesus Christ. If you take the Bible seriously, you should obtain this book and read it carefully. Preferably, you should read it more than once.

Notes:

1. “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

Conceiving the Christian College, by Duane Litfin, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 289 pages. ISBN 0-8028-2783-7. \$20.00. Reviewed by Dr. Thomas R. Wolhuis, Associate Professor of Theology, Dordt College.

Dr. Litfin writes in the context of the on-going discussions on the role of religion in American higher education. This discussion has been carried on lately by historians like George Marsden and Mark Noll, philosophers like Nicholas Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga, theologians, and educators. Every teacher, especially those in theology and religion, addresses the issue in some way in their classrooms, institution, and the academy. Dr. Litfin has clearly set forth some of the basic linchpins of systemically Christian education, where a certain Christian perspective seeks to permeate every aspect of the institution. This kind of view is opposed to that of an umbrella Christian institution, where various voices fit under a sponsoring perspective. Dr. Litfin’s perspective is very clear, and he does an excellent job of summarizing the positions of others in the discussion.

My question is, “Whom is Dr. Litfin addressing and why?” Is the purpose a defense, a persuasion, an explanation, an aid for articulation? Is this written to Christian education leaders, teachers in systemic Christian schools, the academy, constituents, or students? A combination of these is possible, but for this reviewer the answers were not fully clear. At times the book seemed more like a collection of excellent essays than a unified presentation.

The book starts slowly, laying the groundwork of why a Christian college president is addressing this issue and distinguishing this type of systemic Christian school. The third and fourth chapters address why Christian education is Christian. Litfin stresses the Christ-centeredness of this education. At times it seems to take too long to make the point, and some may question the piling up of biblical texts without contexts, but the main point of the lordship of Jesus Christ over all is clear and contrasted to a limited evangelical Christology and a liberal general theology. In his strong stress of obediently serving and loving Jesus

Christ, one wonders about the second commandment of loving your neighbor.

Litfin explicates some of the key phrases of Christian education within the modern discussion by philosophers and educators. These include “Christ-centered education,” “all truth is God’s truth,” and “the integration of faith and learning.” Much of this is very helpful, but here the question of audience comes to the mind of this reviewer. Here it seems to be an in-house discussion to shore up the walls, although it may want to be more than that. Scriptural references and unexplained theological arguments, such as “the image of God,” probably will not address those outside the Christian community, and the technical philosophical argumentation many limit it within this community.

This limiting of audience increases as Litfin presents the importance of revealed Truth. Here Dr. Litfin’s biblical studies background comes in as he applies Paul’s message to the Corinthians and stresses one of his seemingly favorite texts, 1 Corinthians 13:12 (King James): “For now we see through a glass darkly.” Litfin stresses that revelation does not reveal all, but it does reveal some and allows us to see more clearly than without it.

In the last three chapters the implied audience moves back to the academy. Here Litfin defends the loyalty oath of most Christian colleges as a voluntary choice of like-minded people to work together on a given foundation. He then addresses how broadly or narrowly this foundation should be defined, and lastly he argues for the importance of such defined systemic Christian colleges within the academy.

As one who teaches in a systemic Christian college, I found much that I appreciated in Dr. Litfin’s book. I enjoyed his development of basic themes and phrases of Christian education in conversation with many of those