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Abstract

"Watkin is weaving together Biblical themes in the order that they develop, letting Scripture set the agenda for what will be considered, rather than some other approach."

Posting about the book *Biblical Critical Theory* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Cultural Contours of a Christian Worldview: A Review of *Biblical Critical Theory*

Donald Roth

June 20, 2023

Title: *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*

Author: Christopher Watkin

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I made a bold choice this past Spring semester. A new book that came out in November seemed to match closely with the goals and approach that I have built into the honors program here at Dordt University, and so I decided that our class would read through it chapter by chapter together. This was a bold choice for a couple of reasons. First, the book is long, coming in at just over 600 pages. Second, given that length, there was no way I could read the entire book in time to evaluate whether it was worth the investment I was planning to put into it.

Ultimately, this was the right choice. *Biblical Critical Theory* by Christopher Watkin was the right balance of challenge and accessibility for my upper-level college honors students. At the end of the semester, I asked students which chapters were most impactful, expecting that I would trim some chapters from what I assign next year. To my surprise, a majority of students recommended that we continue to read the book in its entirety, even if that ends up taking up the vast majority of the semester. Really, while I will go on in this review to explain both why Watkin's work is noteworthy and what some of his insights are, this simple fact is probably the most ringing endorsement I can give it. Students *appreciated* it and saw value in reading it in its entirety, and I would recommend the same for anyone interested in developing a potent set of tools for closely examining our relation to culture today.

Biblical Theology, Philosophy, and Culture

Watkin's provocative title is a reference to the practice of using a particular theory (typically Marxism) as a lens through which to critique culture and society. However, in this book, Watkin swaps out the Marxism for Biblical theology, seeking to demonstrate how the pattern of Scripture speaks to the issues of the day. In this way, it's important to note that this is specifically Biblical theology being referenced. Biblical theology is an attempt to develop theology along the same trajectory as it develops in Scripture, and by following this format,

Watkin is weaving together Biblical themes in the order that they develop, letting Scripture set the agenda for what will be considered, rather than some other approach.

While Scripture sets the agenda, Watkin pulls in a wealth of philosophical and cultural observations in conversation with Scripture. In most cases, he draws from these conversations to demonstrate how secular philosophy or politics drive us toward polarizing dichotomies, or, in language attuned to philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd, dualisms. Across these divides, Watkin typically argues that the Bible offers what he calls *diagonalization*. This is a move which rejects the fragmentation of the world and recontextualizes a dualism in a way that affirms the truth in both. At the same time, quoting G.K. Chesterton, Watkin argues that diagonalization is not “an amalgam or compromise, but both things at the top of their energy.”¹

It's too common today that Christians domesticate Scripture down to the sorts of stories that fit on a flannel board in a Sunday School class. There's a developmental aspect of what sorts of stories children can understand, but we often write off this vague familiarity as adequate Biblical literacy. Without coming to wrestle with the wonder, difficulty, and mystery of Scripture, we continue to read it with our agenda in the driver's seat, and we are less apt to develop the sort of deep love for the Word of God that endures even under sustained challenge.

The reality is that the Bible, while written *for* us, was not written *to* us. As much as this pithy phrase has been leveraged in ways I'm not in agreement with, there is truth at its heart. The Bible does not answer all of our questions with the detail we would like it to give. In fact, if we want to cultivate a Biblical worldview, we may benefit from suspending some of the questions we would like to ask in order to figure out what sort of questions the Bible is answering. Perhaps those were better questions to be asking in the first place.

This is essentially what Watkin's book does. By following the rhythm of Scripture, letting it set the scope of what will be discussed, and then reaching to seek what philosophy and society have said about some of these same topics, the shape of the conversation is different. Ultimately, Watkin's approach presents his readers with a Christian worldview that is not organized in a logical progression of concepts but one that is felt through the warp and woof of a text intentionally bound to the rhythms of Scripture.

Cultivating a Christian Worldview

Throughout the development of Watkin's book, a number of themes repeatedly arise, and it's worth taking note of some of these landmark features of the worldview that Watkin presents. There isn't space to go into all of them in more detail here. I may take time to tease that out in more detail in another venue, but, for now, I will share a couple of the key features that most impressed both me and my students over this past semester.

At a foundational level, it is remarkable how many times the key Christian assertion of a distinction between the Creator and His Creation helps to untangle thorny philosophical quandaries. Herman Bavinck asserted that “Christianity fits reality like a key in a lock,” and Watkin demonstrates multiple times through this book that a reality grounded in another being who both knows all things and makes them known has the potential to bridge a number of philosophical chasms. I’ll spare you the details of those arguments to instead share an example with a more practical bent: because there is a distinction between Creature and Creator, there is ground for distinction in office. Certain things that are God’s right as our Maker do not carry over to us as things made, even things made in His image. This creates fertile ground for a political philosophy rooted in limited government and equipped to critique the excesses of society without claiming the authority to necessarily step in and use our power to force things to fit our preferences.

Another major theme is what Watkin calls the “u-shaped” vs. “n-shaped” dynamic. This is a way of expressing the Bible’s answer to humanity’s repeated question, “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?” Put differently, humanity tends to ask, “What must I do?” to achieve whatever goal we have in mind. Give Baal enough blood, and the crops will grow. Give a neighbor a hand, and they’ll help you when your sheep is stuck in a well. The logic is typically *quid pro quo*, and it tends to treat others as means to our ends. Instead, the Bible presents us with a Lord who comes down and then leads us up, back to himself. When David asked to build a temple for the Lord, the Lord said He would establish David’s house instead. Watkin calls this the logic of “superabundance,” and it changes our posture toward the world to think about an ethic driven by gratitude for what has been given to us, rather than angles to work to get what we want.

Ultimately, these are just a couple of general sketches of concepts that Watkin details across the course of the book. Further, by deploying these themes in a number of contexts that come up, Watkin helps to go beyond simply *telling* his audience about these ideas and *showing* them instead. I worry that many other readers will be turned away from the book by its daunting length and impressive number of citations. However, the book is surprisingly accessible and it offers a range of both more theoretical and more practical insights that are sure to provide ample return on investment, regardless of whether you might tend toward the more abstract or concrete. Despite its encyclopedic size, Watkin does not offer his book as a comprehensive tome that provides all the answers; instead, he provides a set of tools applied along the horizon set by a Biblical perspective, and he invites others in to observe these concepts in action, then go out and explore where they might apply them. My students found this call to be both bracing and generative for their own thinking, and I recommend it to broader audiences on that ground.