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I Still Believe: Leading Bible Scholars Share Their Stories of Faith and Scholarship (Book Review)

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as the state. When individuals step into the role of governance, do they attempt to maintain an ethic of agapism? Wolterstorff attempts to make some limited punishment and paternalism possible through love as care, but it is unclear whether these amendments to agape extend far enough to accommodate the agapists who are required by their role to punish a wrongdoer or to make a decision for citizens that they would be unable to make on their own.² Wolterstorff does not make clear here whether there exists or ought to exist any morally significant difference when the individual acts on behalf of the state.

In the final two sections of *Justice in Love*, Wolterstorff attempts to ground this re-characterization of agape through two other discussions: the relationship of justice, forgiveness, and punishment, and an exegetical treatment of Romans. These final sections may hold incidental value for interdisciplinary dialogue or for practitioners (such as pastors or counselors) approaching Wolterstorff's text. However, these parts of the text do not add significant contributions to the critique and construction found in the first two sections. By the end of Part Two, Wolterstorff has given an intriguing construction of justice and love's compatibility that would spark further thought and dialogue on its own. This is not to suggest that the further discussions are not worthwhile, but that this text may not have been the proper venue to attempt such expansive discussions. In particular, Wolterstorff's exegetical treatment of Romans with a renewed focus on the justice of God feels disconnected from the rest of the text. While Wolterstorff makes provocative suggestions by engaging the New Perspective on Paul, his conclusions often feel largely disconnected from his larger discussion of agape.

Justice in Love serves as an excellent primer for understanding the complexities of the relationship of love and justice, both philosophically and practically. His critique of Nygren's work and his constructive alternative contribute significantly to discussions about the love commandment and an agape love-ethic. This text, I believe, will prove beneficial to Christian theorists and practitioners alike in developing an ethic of justice, self-love, and world engagement. While much of the discussion surrounding agape has been undertaken by voices emphasizing its radical distinctiveness, Wolterstorff helpfully speaks from a Reformed perspective that situates agape within a broader understanding of God's sovereign plan for human life. At his best moments in the text, Wolterstorff offers a vision of Christ's call to love that takes seriously care for the self, justice for all, and a transformational agapism aimed at healing a broken world.

Endnotes

1. Of particular note are Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Orders of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008; and Timothy Jackson, *Political Agape: Christian Love and Liberal Democracy*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015. Both of these authors dedicate more time and thought to the question of how compatible love is with variants of justice specific to Liberalism.
2. Think of the archetypal judge in Book XIX of Augustine's *City of God*, who is called to and carries out his task in this fallen world but recognizes the tension of his position.

I Still Believe: Leading Bible Scholars Share Their Stories of Faith and Scholarship. John Byron and Joel Lohr, eds. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015. 249 pp. ISBN 970-0310515166. Reviewed by Jamin Hübner, Assistant Professor of Christian Studies and Director of Institutional Effectiveness, John Witherspoon College.

One of the greatest glories of the Christian faith is its ancient and diverse tradition of changed lives. From Abraham to Augustine, Hagar to Mary, Luther to Lewis, and the millions of others throughout history, one cannot help but marvel at the power of the Christian message and God's

unrelenting pursuit of individuals. In many ways, personal and public testimony embodies the gospel; for in telling others about God's grace in our lives, we preach the good news about Christ: real, local, and meaningful (or in more trendy terms, "genuine, authentic, raw").

But this vital brew often goes untapped. The practice of story-telling is a lost art in today's "modern world," and the life-transforming power of the Christian story can become but a foggy memory of distant and irrelevant "Bible times." How fitting, then, that two Christian professors try to revive this dormant or even forgotten gospel for a new era. How? By compiling one of the most impressive autobiographical accounts of biblical scholars ever produced.

The book is titled *I (Still) Believe: Leading Bible Scholars Share Their Stories of Faith and Scholarship*, with chapters by Richard Bauckham, Walter Brueggemann, Ellen Davis, James Dunn, Gordon Fee, Beverly Roberts, John Goldingay, Donald Hagner, Morna Hooker, Edith Humphrey, Andrew Lincoln, Scot McKnight, J. Ramsey Michaels, Patrick Miller, R. L. Moberly, Katharine Sakenfeld, Phyllis Trible, and Bruce Waltke.

Those in Christian studies will immediately appreciate a book with *all* of these contributors. "We got our dream team," write the editors, "A book envisioned to contain fifteen essays ended up with eighteen as a result.... This speaks, we think, to the authors' interest... [and] speaks to its worth" (12). One can only suspect that the popularity and influence of this treasure-trove will grow as more and more Christians begin to appreciate its value and the timeless worth of "gray hair" (Prov 16:31; 20:29).

As a compilation of autobiographies, the book should not be reviewed through a summary of its chapters. So what follows is a brief commentary on its approach, a summary of its trends and impressions that surface frequently in the authors' stories, and a glance at the "encouragement" and "advice" that the book offers to those considering entering academia.

Impressions and Trends

One of the biggest challenges that surround Christian scholars is what to do with and how to think about the Bible. For this reason, the editors specifically asked the contributors (among other questions) how they might "address the question of 'losing faith' through serious study of the Bible." I focus on this question because it seemed to be one of the most prominent of all the talking points in the essays. Other contributors spent great energy on how "life in the church affected [their]

research," how they became a biblical scholar, and how, of course, academics enriched their Christian lives (15-16). But it did seem that a personal, substantial period of "wrestling with the Bible" was present in almost every story. For some, this was a familiar experience, almost "business as usual." For others, it was a traumatic encounter that led to nothing short of a changed life. In any case, I am reminded of N. T. Wright's comments in *Scripture and the Authority of God* about Christians' dynamic relationship with the Bible throughout different phases of their lives. *I Still Believe* vindicates and embodies this idea.

Such diverse interaction with the Bible may also challenge the idea that those in "liberal" institutions have little respect or personal investment in biblical study. Virtually nothing about each contributor's story indicates that one tradition or denomination has a monopoly over biblical knowledge. The Bible is not the evangelical's book because of contemporary defenses of inspiration; not the Reformed's book because of *sola scriptura*; not the Catholic's book because of tradition or magisterial authority, etc. Rather, the Bible is for the Christian and for the church at large. All of the contributors were (and remain) Christians, and this fact seemed to them sufficient for their continued interest in both personal and academic involvement with the scriptures.

As I suggested in the introduction, the cumulative effect of these testimonies is tremendously powerful. But that is not, for example, because each person's prayers about his or her career were miraculously answered (several, like Goldingay, Davis, and Fee, had no intention of becoming biblical scholars). Rather, their awe comes from the conflicts and trials that were overcome—the dark, weighty matters that contrasted with God's continued faithfulness. Many of them tell stories of loss—loss of a spouse (to death or divorce), loss of a friend, loss of a job—and various layers of suffering naturally assert themselves into the lucid narratives of the contributors. Academia and research, while rewarding in many ways, are rarely an insulated joy-ride. "I have hit patches," writes Gaventa, "when I believed I would never write another word" (90). Gaventa openly laments a page earlier:

I grow weary of facing the same questions year in and out, decade in and decade out... I find it

deeply discouraging that, after nearly four decades of teaching, every year brings the same worn-out questions.... I worry about a scholarly environment that rewards certain forms of aggression that have little or nothing to do with the quality of one's research or teaching and that may well pose stumbling blocks..." (89).

As one might expect, the authors' trials and biographical dynamics vary. Hagner, for example, records a brief episode of agnosticism (106), while Michaels' story, entitled "Four Cords and an Anchor," recounts phases of his journey involving the cords of "Roman Catholicism, Fundamentalism, Anabaptism, and Calvinism" (173) and the anchor of his (now deceased) wife, Betty (185). Family and children can pose a variety of challenges—and at different seasons of life. Humphrey talks about the somewhat bizarre incident of how her childlessness made nationwide headlines (135), while Gaventa expresses perhaps a common theme of the parent-scholar: "When I was at my desk I wanted to be with my infant son, and when I was with him, I wanted to be at my desk" (88).

Doubt is certainly a common theme in these stories. For some, they doubted whether Christianity was in any sense true; others doubted the accuracy of their childhood education; still others questioned whether God, who certainly exists, is really trustworthy or knowable. Hooker speaks of Christian scholars, "like myself," who "are clinging on to faith by their eyebrows—but cling they do" (124).

After decades of self-doubt, trials of life, and external criticism, some authors conclude their time-test convictions in plain terms. Here are just three samples:

My existential struggles with illness and bereavement have undoubtedly colored my handling of Scripture. My night as wrestling Jacob finally persuaded me that most kinds of theodicy, attempts to rationalize and/or justify the ways of God, are futile; the bottom line is that either you trust, or you don't. (Moberly 205)

When I have been tempted to doubt the truth of Christianity, I have discovered that I really cannot.... I have sat myself down and turned again to the basis. What is one to make of the *story of Jesus*, his words and deeds, his self-consciousness? The

evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is incontrovertible. All attempted accounts to explain it away are totally unconvincing. *The transformation of the disciples* from weak and fearful men to strong, courageous proclaimers of the gospel, willing to face martyrdom, is explainable only from their experience of the resurrected Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit." (Hagner 115)

I remain convinced that without the Christian faith what one is left with logically is nihilism in which there is no room for the most important human aspirations and ethical values with which most people in fact live out their lives. In other words, I believe that trust in the God disclosed in Christ provides the most coherent way of seeing existence as a gift and the best hope for living and loving. (Lincoln 156)

As readers of *I Still Believe* will ultimately realize, some of the biggest reflections surface toward the end of one's life—and these are some of the greatest treasures of the book. With career games behind and more wisdom in stock, some authors *cut loose* and speak their minds. R. Ramsey Michaels' essay has this tone. And I was particularly struck by Goldingay's sober words toward the end of his essay: "I am inclined to think that nothing I do has any great value. Americans like to believe in legacies; I expect to be forgotten...[.] in general my works make no significant contribution to the life of the church or the purpose of God in the world" (103).

One challenge that I am glad that the authors did not gloss over was institutional politics and the risks involved by teaching at "conservative institutions," namely, the art of being "theologically correct." Other than the "fortress mentality" common in 20th-century evangelical fundamentalism (107), almost all of the contributors address (to use one example) the sub-topic of "biblical inerrancy," lamenting its negative effect on them and on biblical scholarship. Lincoln records his tenure deferment over the issue (154), Hagner says it "had a paralyzing effect when it came to biblical scholarship" at one point in Covenant Seminary's history (107), McKnight calls it a problematic "political term" (168), and Ramsey recounts how he "became a casualty" because of similar issues and then, ironically, landed his next (and current) job in the "Buckle of the Bible belt" of Missouri (179). I couldn't help

but think of how these testimonies vindicate some of the central, sociological claims in Carlos Bovell's *Rehabilitating Inerrancy in a Culture of Fear and Inerrancy and the Spiritual Formation of Younger Evangelicals*, Christian Smith's *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture*, and, perhaps most of all, James Barr's classic book *Escape from Fundamentalism*.

Such war stories only widen as one glides through the chapters. Religious scholars in the protestant-evangelical tradition seem regularly under the gun for "not getting it right," as Fee says. For Fee, that meant being "forced to leave [Costa Mesa] because I failed to be 'right' in my handling of Revelation's eschatology" (78). In Hagner's view of the situation, "Some who lose their faith through their studies are often driven away from believing by fundamentalist contexts which allowed them no alternative between, on the one hand, a closed-minded, clench-fisted, fear-ridden mentality and, on the other, outright unbelief, whether agnostic or atheistic" (108). Whether the topic is bibliology, eschatology, or ecclesiology, the 20th-century context (e.g., the "battle for the Bible") and the influence of American fundamentalism substantially impacted the majority of contributors at some point in their career.

This point leads to a final and notable observation: the common shift towards "mere Christianity," a kind of ecumenism as the final stage in each author's theology. No contributors who were raised in a Christian home ended up embracing a more "conservative theology" than in their upbringing. Others revealed their personal disillusionment with the institutional aspects of faith and the endless strata in ecclesiology and denominations. "My relationship to the institutional church..." writes Tribble, "lost its appeal—a condition that still prevails" (229). Similar remarks are found in the essays by Dunn (60), Humphrey

(138), and others.

All of this leaves readers with a profound desire for the internal unity of the church.

Conclusion

As a young professor of theology, I probably find the stories of *I Still Believe* more encouraging than the average, non-academic reader might. But there is undoubtedly wisdom to be shared by all. To conclude this review, I want to let a handful of the authors directly share some of this wisdom in plain terms:

When facing inevitable criticism, it is important, to resist the temptation of self-justification, but instead to work with gusto, writing and teaching what you love...maintain friendship with those who do not know [Christ], but stay closer to those who are wiser, shinier, and more transparent than you are. (Humphrey 43)

If the readers of these autobiographies plan to write, I want to encourage them to write something worthwhile (something that is true and important), not just something that makes a contribution to a debate. (Goldingay 104)

Keep asking questions about the texts and seeking truth as rigorously as you can—and don't trust other scholars' footnotes or references! Read as widely as possible in other related areas and disciplines. (Lincoln 157)

[1] Do not arrive too soon at fixed, settled positions, but remain open to new emergences that regularly lead to new territory.... [2] Read widely and deeply....[3] Alter conversation partners with some frequent regularity....[4] Remember that we are not the first ones to struggle with these issues.... (Brueggemann 41-42)