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Conceiving the Christian College (Book Review)

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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

who have been my teachers. I found little with which I disagreed, but for me little was new. Still the articulation was helpful. I think that the book is a worthy contribution to the discussion in at least focusing some of the basic perspectives of Christian education and issues within the academy. For those who teach in systemic Christian schools, this book should be helpful in clarifying their own perspective and approach. For those who do not teach

in such institutions and some who may be suspicious of them, this book may help them understand the approach more fully. Yet I fear that it will not fully convince them or answer many of their questions, and it may even confirm some suspicions of the way Scripture and theology are used. This book should help the discussion, but there is still much to address.

Paul: In Fresh Perspective, by N. T. Wright, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005, 195pp. Reviewed by Dr. Thomas R. Wolthuis, Associate Professor of Theology, Dordt College.

N. T. Wright is a significant force in New Testament scholarship. His three large and highly detailed volumes, in a project he entitled “Christian Origins and the Question of God,” are on Jesus’ reconstitution of the People of God, the death of Jesus and the victory of God, and the resurrection of Jesus. These works, along with many other smaller books, have stimulated a great deal of discussion within New Testament scholarship. Wright has challenged the so-called “historical” reconstructions of Jesus with one of his own, which is much more amenable to traditional Christian perspectives yet which also challenges these perspectives to see Jesus in his real historical situation. Yet Wright’s scholarly beginnings were in Pauline Studies, to which he has now returned in his new book, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*.

This book is a reworking of Wright’s 2004 Cambridge University Hulsean Lectures and still retains significant aspects of this origin. Wright divides the book into two parts: themes and structures. He defines the themes in the light of recent scholarship on Paul and the structures as “a miniature systematic account of the main theological contours of Paul’s thought” (xi). This arrangement and perspective make it clear that this work is meant to address the scholarly debates about Paul, the background of whom is often assumed.

In the first chapter Wright seeks to locate Paul in both his historical world and the world of scholarship. Wright sees Paul as rooted in Judaism but seeking to address a Hellenistic world in the face of Roman domination. He advocates the “New Perspective” on Paul, both in terms of Paul’s Jewishness and his concern for how God has fulfilled his promises in Jesus the Christ, contrary to ahistorical, individual, and Hellenistic approaches to Paul.

The second chapter develops Pauline themes of creation and covenant based in the Hebrew Scriptures. Wright explores three fundamental Pauline passages—Colossians 1:15-20, 1 Corinthians 15, and Romans 1-11—in the context of the Hebrew background and expectations met in Jesus, the Messiah. He summarizes the problem as the fracturing of human community and creational relationships based in the human failure to trust and praise God. Jesus overcame this problem through perfect obedience

and returned the people of God to the original covenantal purpose of a worldwide mission of light.

Wright develops Paul’s view of Jesus, the Messiah, in the third chapter in the light of apocalyptic expectations. Here much of Wright’s work on Jesus rings through, but the main thrust is to advocate the redefinition of apocalyptic as “inaugurated eschatology,” that God’s ultimate future has come forward into the middle of history. The implications of this in Paul’s setting in Roman Empire are developed in the fourth chapter. Fundamentally, Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not. Here again Wright’s strong political perspective on the implications of Jesus and the Christian message comes through.

In the “Structures” section, Wright returns to themes from his earlier work on Jesus. In the fifth chapter he explores how Paul’s Christology and view of the Spirit could fit within Jewish monotheism. The sixth chapter looks at Paul’s view of the People of God in continuity with Jewish views and Jesus’ and the Spirit’s **reworking of those views** in the church. Here Wright restates his position that “justification” addresses who belongs to the people of God and how one can tell, not how someone becomes a Christian. Then, in the seventh chapter, Wright returns to understanding Jesus, the Spirit, and Paul in the context of eschatology, again advocating the expressions and implications of the presence of the future.

In the last chapter, Wright addresses the old question of the relationship among Jesus, Paul, and Christianity. He argues that Paul stood in a different place within God’s purposes and work and in a different cultural context than did Jesus. Paul clearly saw his unique role within God’s purposes in the world, and Wright briefly presents how the church is to carry out its role in its place in God’s purposes and its present cultural setting.

I approached Wright’s work as a teacher of biblical studies, a preacher, and a believing Christian. In all these roles I found the book stimulating and at times disappointing. The form of the book raised some frustrations. The length is more manageable than many of Wright’s books, but it still reads like slightly reworked lectures. At times one needs to picture a lecture setting to catch the flow of a section, to understand the hidden humor, or to translate