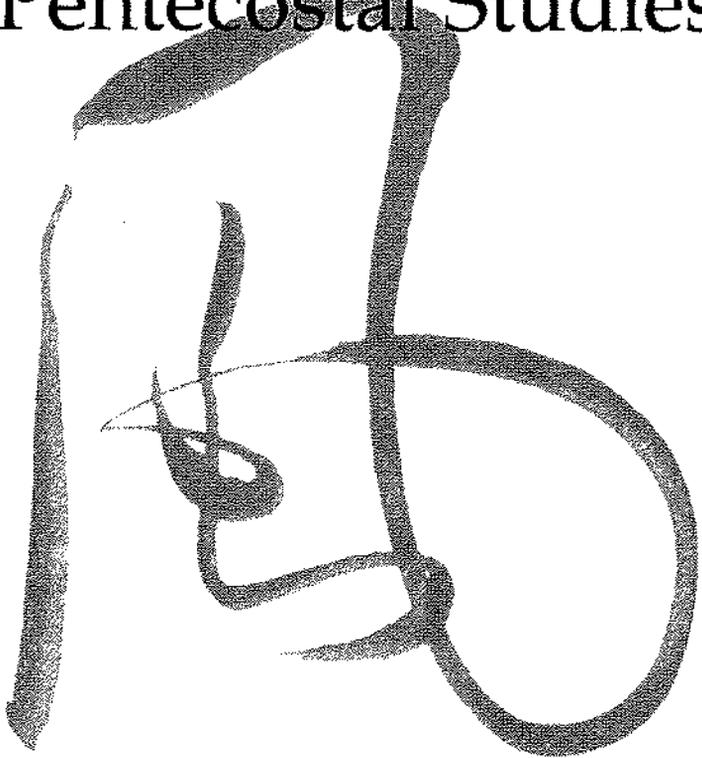


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Book Reviews

BOOK REVIEWS

Reinhard Boettcher, ed. *Witnessing to God's Faithfulness. Issues of Biblical Authority*, Lutheran World Federation Studies 2006. Geneva: Lutheran World Federation. 2006. 241 pp.

Although this collection of essays edited by Reinhard Boettcher is meant to be for Lutherans, Pentecostals will gain much from the issues that were raised. The way the articles are written makes this anthology readable for informed lay people. The question of biblical authority in connection with the understanding of the infallible nature of the biblical text is not only a question that Lutherans are asking. It is a concern of all the Christian denominational bodies, including the Pentecostal-Charismatic groups. Thus, this book is highly recommendable for non-academic Christians to read.

The articles in this volume were the result of the presentations and discussions of a Lutheran theologians' study group. The members of the study group are all Lutheran theologians from different countries: Márta Cserhádi (Hungary), Mercedes Garcia Bachmann (Argentina), Elelwani Bethuel Farisani (South Africa), Diane Jacobson (U.S.A.), Wilfried John (Malaysia), Alexander Priloutskii (Russia), and Giinter Thomas (Germany), plus the editor of the volume, Reinhard Boettcher (Switzerland). The introduction of the book introduces the current discussion among the Lutherans about the "conflicting approaches" in understanding the Bible as God's Word for today. (9)

The question of biblical authority should be dealt with by the World Council of Churches in light of ecumenical considerations as well as fundamentalist proclivities of participating churches. The editor, after an introduction about the compilation of essays, provides a short article entitled "The Bible: Word of God" as a preliminary article to the whole volume. Boettcher discussed the content of the Bible as a compilation of different books that were theologically diverse and inherently human. (13-4) He also highlights that although Lutherans may see "justification" as the core of the biblical text, he argues that it is only one of the many important contents of the Bible. (14-5) After discussing the canonicity and historicity of the Bible, Boettcher addresses the Christian claim of biblical inspiration and witness of God's Word. (20-1)

The editor wrote three articles and seven comments for each of the seven chapters, plus the introduction and an appendix. Each author has contributed two articles each except for Priloutskii. The first chapter captures what the book is all about: "The Bible and its Authority." Thomas' essay tackles the Bible and its understanding as the Word/s of God. An important treatise is also written by Priloutskii about the biblical authority entailing the inspiration of the text and the Bible as a powerful book. After the two essays, a couple of pages were used for a few comments by the editor where he points out that the view of Priloutskii is "informed by Russian Orthodox context;" (45) and Thomas approaches the issue in terms of "divine election" wherein what has been chosen is "not perfect but suitable for God's purposes." (46)

Chapter two: "Unity and Diversity of the Bible" presents the approaches of reading the various biblical genres. Here Jacobson maps out the challenges that Bible reading Christians are facing. She recognizes the discrepancies in the historical narratives as well as creation accounts and the problems in the ethical and lawful matters in the Bible. Jacobson came up with "the Lutheran strategy" in interpreting the different biblical books and forms: "explore the literal, be led by the Spirit and find the gospel core." (54)

The second article by Cserhádi in the same chapter argues that unified interpretative tools in looking at "the unity of the Bible" are "the 'canon within the canon' approach, the centrality of Jesus as the Christ and justification by grace as unifying center." (65; see 65-70) The editor commented at the end of the chapter citing how Priloutskii sees the problem more with the limitation of human understanding, while the other contributors who were members of the discussion group consider that the difficulties of interpretation "arise when the Bible is regarded as the only Word of God, when its incarnational character is denied and when God's Word is equated with the Bible." (79-80)

The third chapter entitled "The Bible and the History of God's Revelation" is most interesting and the only chapter with three essays, two by Boettcher and another one by John. The articles would catch the attention of Pentecostal-Charismatic readers because the authors explore the issues of the Spirit's role in biblical authority and divine revelation. Boettcher's first piece deals with the understanding of the sixty-six books that makes the biblical canon of the Scriptures and the nature of the assumed authority of these canonical "Word of God." (83-96)

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His second discourse looks at "the confession of faith" in relationship to "the Bible" and "the Church from a Lutheran perspective" where he makes a distinction between the relativity of the Lutheran confessions to express beliefs and the authority of canon to witness the Word of God through the biblical text. (101-4) The Pentecostals and Charismatic readers may be interested in the treatment of "the pneumatological conception" of "the Bible as the Word of God" by Thomas (30-1) and the discussions of "Holy Scripture with the power of the Holy Spirit" by Boettcher. (93-5)

Another interesting passage is Jacobson's section on the Spirit as guiding the reading of the Bible. (54-7) The section called "Holy Scripture with the power of the Holy Spirit" (93-5) in Boettcher's article "The Biblical Canon in the History of God's Revelation", in the third chapter, explores how the Spirit of God makes the reading of the Bible real to the believer.

However, the most telling essay among others, because it directly talks about the Pentecostal claim of continuing revelation of God, is written by John in chapter three which is entitled "The Biblical Canon [sic]: Closed Forever or Open to Extension?" (105-15) Here, John analyzes the growth of the Pentecostals and Charismatics and their view on prophecy and the reality of God's revelation. The comments at the end of this chapter deal with the finality of the Scriptures.

Chapters four, five, six, and seven of the current volume basically survey "creative," "critical," "different ways," and "living the Bible" interpretative approaches. The essays contributed by the members of the study group are contextual in nature. The article of Jacobson on the necessity of critical study of the Bible fits her context well in North America. (121-32) Her article is followed by a very brief reflection on historical methodology by Thomas, in his German context, who argues that this approach is most helpful for "theological" purposes rather than "institutional." (135-6) The comment on chapter four by the editor that the thinking of Jacobson and Thomas were shaped by their academic backgrounds is noteworthy. The "role of power" in biblical interpretation is discussed by Bachmann, from a "Latin American Feminist" view, and Farisani, who writes from the context of South African Apartheid. (141-68)

The editorial remark on chapter five that "it is no coincidence that the Latin American and South African participants chose to address this topic" because their societal backgrounds were known for people who abused the interpretation of the Bible "to legitimize oppressive power" is significant. (173) Chapter six is composed of the articles of Cserháti

on scholarly interpretation and engaging identification with the scriptural text (177-89), and Farisani about the expert and common readers of the Bible within the fold of Christianity. (193-203) They are meant to seek out the dynamic nature of biblical hermeneutics within the community of believers. The editor notes: "The issue of ordinary and trained readers emerges only beyond the sermon." (207)

The last chapter is applicable indeed to every believing Bible reader: "'We are the Bible People Read': Living the Bible within God's Mission." The two articles came from Bachmann, coming from a Latin American context, who argues that confessing Christians should have credibility (211-20), and John, who sees the vitality of the "authority of the Bible and the credibility of the witnessing community in Asia" that would make the preaching of the biblical text effective. (223-32). The final observations of Boettcher that "the credibility of the church as the community that interprets the gospel varies from context to context" and that, from a missiological view, "a close link between the church's credibility and that of the Bible" are important.

The appendix, which could also be an epilogue, brings out the heart of the debate among the contributors to the volume in different ways for they affirm that "the Bible [is] indispensable for Christian faith." (240)

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