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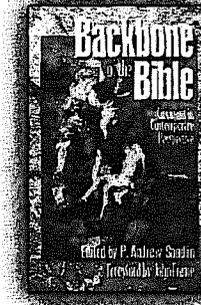
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## BOOK REVIEWS



**BACKBONE OF THE BIBLE**  
P. Andrew Sandlin, editor  
Nacogdoches, Texas: Covenant Media  
Press (2004)  
148 pages, paper, \$12.99

Traditional Protestant understanding of Paul, shaped by both Reformation and post-Reformation theology, has undergone a number of serious challenges since the late 1970s. The challenge, at least from within Protestant circles, has generally come from several sources. Rightly or wrongly, this challenge has come to be known as the “New Perspective.” In reality, this designation is highly questionable. Like any label it has merit. But like most labels, especially labels used when a particular historic idea is being challenged, this label is unfortunate.

The label “New Perspective” (NP) has several problems. First, this perspective is not really new. One scholar has gone so far as to call the modern situation a “post-New Perspective era.” In addition, many who borrow ideas from various insights set forward by the NP believe this approach is really an “original” perspective on Paul. These scholars believe that the NP better understands Paul’s real relationship to the Jewish law and to his Second Temple historical context. Furthermore, the term NP has been employed by critics to paint with a very wide brush. And the paint used is generally black and liberally applied. Even NP critic D. A. Carson admits that the NP cannot be reduced to one single perspective (cf. Don Garlington, “Law and Gospel: The Contribution of the ‘New Perspective’ on Paul,” in *Reformation & Revival Journal*, Volume 14, Number 1, 2005).

When new theological insights are discussed, or old ones are brought into the light for reconsideration, they are put into a dark box labeled "heresy." No Christian, and no sector of the church, is immune to this tendency. Evangelicals, often lacking a clear sense of the confessional nature of classical Christian faith, are particularly prone to this danger. Reformed evangelicals, believing that every good word in biblical theology can be found in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century categories, are *particularly* prone to danger in this regard.

As a result of the present context, I fear that this book, *Backbone of the Bible*, might well prove to be a valuable contribution that gets lost in the smoke of battle. Some conservative Reformed readers will no doubt find a label for this book and put it aside. Such critics are already committed to full-scale warfare and will seek to keep others from a serious reckoning with such a helpful collection of cogent essays. Let me explain.

I wish I had a dollar for every time that I have come across reviews dealing with the current biblical discussion about justification, gospel, law, and covenant that have used terms like "traditional Reformed thinking," "theological confusion," or "dangerous error." I would be a rich man, I assure you. My shelves contain many books, monographs, and reviews that weigh in on these important subjects by employing this kind of intemperate language.

No one who loves the Protestant Reformation, as I do, or who freely confesses themselves to be a Reformed thinker, as I do, wants to abandon the best of Reformed theology or create theological confusion. But that is precisely what is alleged in the present atmosphere. If the history of theological debate teaches us anything, it teaches that we will need time to process our arguments. In the process of time we will also need measured and wise books, as well as balanced and insightful articles, that require us to *think more deeply*. We also need warm hearts, and cool heads, that will refuse to allow the debate to turn ugly.

This volume is particularly helpful because it seeks to do both. It presents important biblical and historical arguments, most of which I confess to agree with. It also presents these

arguments in a way that invites participation and response. These authors do not think they have the last word, but they do believe they have a word that needs to be heard and weighed by serious biblical readers.

### THE COVENANT

The history of theology, especially Reformed theology, demonstrates a long-standing interest in the biblical concept of covenant. This interest, if it is to remain sufficiently biblical, must not be rooted in a particular type of Pauline theology, at least not initially. I believe the best kind of covenant theology starts with a serious reading of Deuteronomy. Here, in chapter 27, Moses states twelve curses that will most surely fall upon the elect people if they do not *keep* the covenant. This covenantal language is plainly *not* unilateral. Reformed readers, who take such texts seriously, should never rush to the conclusions of systematic theology, with regard to covenant language, unless they have first examined such texts in light of their proper historical-redemptive setting. (It is against such a historical background that Paul argues the way he does in Romans 9, in the much better known text on election and covenant.)

But the essayists of *Backbone of the Bible* are not satisfied to place the covenant in its proper historical/biblical context as a simple end in itself. They see quite clearly that covenantal language is clearly *linked* to justification language in the New Testament. Furthermore, they understand that justification language is used by biblical writers in the past tense, present tense, and future tense. For them, this simple observation requires other compelling observations for a faithful biblical theology.

Put still differently, the questions raised here are these—Should the covenant be understood as eternal *and* historical? as individual *and* communal? and/or as gracious *and* obligatory? The answer given consistently by the six contributors to this volume is affirmative. Simply put, does the covenant truly promise *both* blessing and cursing to all who enter into it by grace? Is the covenant a *way into justification*, and nothing else that follows entry really ultimately matters, or is the covenant

an *opening up of a gracious relationship*, with all its attendant biblical promises for those who stay in this communal way?

### JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

At the heart of the sixteenth-century debate with Roman Catholic theology was the doctrine of justification. Ever since Luther stated that justification was by faith alone, and that this was the truth by which the church "stands or falls," an unsettling debate has raged. It still rages today, even though new biblical insights offer hopeful ways of addressing old problems with new language. To invoke justification by faith alone as a point of departure for a modern teacher is to raise the most serious of questions. (Indeed, some even suggest that the essayists in this book, and this reviewer as well, *may not be real Christians!*) The question persists, however. Is justification by faith alone the *real issue* in this present debate among the Reformed? I am not convinced that it is.

R. C. Sproul, in his polemical book, *Getting the Gospel Right* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999, 160), says that "man's relationship to God in creation was based on works. What Adam failed to achieve, Christ, the second Adam, succeeded in achieving. Ultimately the only way one can be justified is by works." You need to read that last sentence again. If you have been taught a certain way of framing the gospel and this justification debate, you will see Sproul's point quickly. If your thinking has not been so framed, you are more than likely amazed at it at first glance.

The first time I actually heard such a statement I confess I was amazed. Then I was taught about "merit" and "covenant" and "obedience." It was then explained to me that the only way any one could ever be saved was through keeping the whole law. Since only Christ kept the law, the only way I could be saved, in this system of thought, was for Christ to do the work of *meriting salvation* for me. That is exactly what Sproul, and some Reformed theologians, believe is the case. I am not really justified by faith, if I may put it crassly and simply, but I am justified by works, *the works of Christ*. Indeed, in this way of stating it these teachers glory in this precise point, often suggesting

that any other way of putting the message denies the gospel.

This, I want to suggest, is ground zero in the present debate for a lot of conservative Reformed people. If Sproul is right, then the essayists in this volume are profoundly wrong. If these essayists are right, then Sproul is wrong. There is no other way to read the debate. The question, to my mind, is "What difference does it make after all?" A reading of the seven essays in *Backbone of the Bible* will offer an engaging, and pastorally helpful, answer, albeit one that is by necessity a work in progress.

### A THIRD WAY?

Professor John Frame, who has seen more than his share of controversies among the Reformed, writes an important foreword for this volume. He wonders aloud if the controversies that have plagued Reformed Christians in these (and other) areas, might actually allow us to see important truths on both sides of this debate. Frame is not suggesting that truth is dialectical—that views that clearly contradict each other are all true. He is too bright to fall into this trap. What he suggests is that truth can be found by listening to the points, counterpoints, and conclusions of respective insights, prompting us to seek new alternatives, or a third way.

I have to say I am convinced Frame is correct. If there is anything I have learned over three-plus decades of theological debate it is that tenaciously-held positions must be presented, debated, and then carefully weighed. Sometimes one side is almost entirely right. Often, however, both sides make perfectly good points, and the best conclusion is to find a new and better way of putting the conclusion based upon the biblical evidence and the insights we gain in how to present it. Frame puts this well when he says, "I initially presume that among all of these viewpoints there is some insight to be found, or at least some good questions that need to be addressed" (8).

In Frame's words, these essays do not offer "a party line from which no friend of ours may deviate, but [they are] a set of theses that deserve careful attention" (8). Bravo! It is precisely this tone that endears me to this collection. But Frame,

an irenic man if there ever was one, uses some strong language (and explains his reasons for doing so) to describe some recent criticisms of Norman Shepherd's teaching—criticisms calling it heresy and suggesting that Shepherd teaches "another gospel" (11). He is so right in his assessment that I fear his concern will still be missed by partisans, and their devoted followers, who think they are doing God a great service by further dividing the church.

### THE ESSAYS

Norman Shepherd's two essays address the matter of faith in the Pauline epistles in particular, and then the role of works in Reformed theology historically. The first essay, decidedly more biblical by design, is simple, clear, and tightly reasoned. Shepherd argues that justification, in its essence, *equals* forgiveness. The ground of justification, for Paul, is Christ's suffering and death. Justifying faith is *faith in Jesus* and it is *inherently penitential*. The faith Paul preached, and called for in his hearers, was always *obedient*. For Paul, faith never assumed that repentance would *logically follow*, nor did Pauline faith assume repentance was simply the *fruit of justifying faith*. No, Shepherd argues, and argues powerfully I believe, that Paul *explicitly demanded both faith and repentance* (91). Further, "the righteousness of those who obey the law is not the righteousness of meritorious achievement, but the righteousness of faith" (94). This is the faith imputed to Abraham for righteousness (Romans 4:9).

In one of the more important biblical arguments advanced by Shepherd, he believes the phrase, "the works of the law," refers to much more than the old ceremonial laws of the old covenant. It is, Shepherd argues, "the whole Mosaic system as a way of life" (95). This conclusion is warranted exegetically and is also shared by most modern Paul scholars. Ordinary readers, and especially seminary-trained pastors, need to deal with this issue *before* they attempt to teach Romans again. Shepherd further argues that "works of the law" refer to "a limited selection of laws found in the Scripture" (97), and those who were seeking to be justified by "the works of the law" were actually

rejecting the biblical doctrine of justification by faith (98). This is why Abraham is presented to us as he is in chapter 4 of Romans. Shepherd's conclusion is stunning, at least for the person who has not wrestled with Romans in this way (99).

With this stance, these people who were relying on works of the law had in effect transformed the law of Moses from a revelation of God's gracious saving purpose in the world into a program of salvation earned by the merit of works. The works of the law are the works of meritorious self-righteousness that only serve to mark gross sin and disobedience. By the grace of God, Paul comes to the point in his life when he throws them all away as so much rubbish in order that he might gain Christ and his righteousness, the righteousness that comes down from God, the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and specifically the righteousness of his death and resurrection (Philippians 3:9–11).

So, Shepherd concludes: "How did we get from justification by faith in Pauline theology to justification by works in Reformed theology?" (101). His second essay seeks to answer that question. As with any attempt at historical argumentation there are points here that can be argued differently. Shepherd is personally convinced that Reformed tradition is not of one piece on this matter. He believes, indeed he strongly affirms, that his position is not only found in the Reformed creeds but is *the position most consistent with that tradition*. I confess that I am not personally convinced by all his arguments. Further, I am less interested in this debate since at day's end, I want to know what the Scripture teaches more than what a particular tradition confesses. I do wonder, however, in the present context, what *sola Scriptura* practically means for some Reformed Christians.

Andrew Sandlin, the editor of this volume, provides a provocative essay that also deals intentionally with exegetical issues. He provides solid argumentation for the point that saving faith is by definition, *living and obedient faith*. Sandlin cogently reasons that the relationship between gospel and law is one that should be seen, in biblical terms, as a subset of faith, obedience, and eternal life. He is clearly correct. The

problem is that his conclusions challenge traditional categories. He is not seeking novelty for the sake of novelty, but truth within the framework of an orthodox mainstream. His instincts are sound and his conclusions are consistently helpful. He is particularly insightful to remind us that "objectivity resides in Christ alone revealed in His Word, not in human confessions of faith" (65).

Our confessions and definitions of truth are always human and fallible, thus subject to error and in continual need of revision. Reformed theology must never become an enterprise in finding the *right creed* and thus ending the discussion there.

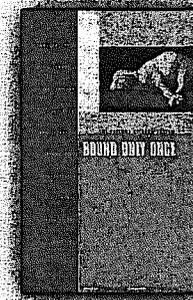
Roger Wagner, in a good preface, notes that gospel and law are better understood as complementary, not antithetical. Jeffrey Ventrella, in a superb opening chapter, explores the danger of sectarianism and makes several wise pastoral observations that are really worth the price of the book.

Randy Booth, Roger Wagner, and Jeffrey Neill, all thoughtful, seasoned pastors, deal with the role of covenant, church membership, apostasy, and biblical ethics. There is much in each of their essays to challenge people from various ecclesial backgrounds. The style of each essay is inviting and the authors each argue their respective case quite clearly. Agree or not, you will *understand* the point each makes.

#### A CONCLUSION

This volume is noteworthy because it is a measured, generous, and very wise book. It does not convince me at every point, especially with regard to covenant inclusion and membership in the visible church, but the essential points made here are important and they are made succinctly. There are a number of valuable scholarly works on each subject addressed herein, but few books written at a popular and readable level accomplish so much in so few pages. I highly recommend this symposium as a valuable contribution to an important and growing body of biblical and theological literature.

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG  
Editor-in-Chief



#### *BOUND ONLY ONCE: THE FAILURE OF OPEN THEISM*

Douglas Wilson, editor

Canon Press: Moscow, Idaho (2001)

230 pages, paper, \$14.00

Open Theism, which touts itself as "good news theology for the twenty-first century" and brags that it is "groundbreaking" and "fresh," is little more than leftover Pelagianism and Socinianism repackaged to look fresh. As Ben Merkle makes clear in his chapter titled, "Liberals in Drag," understanding their debt to history (which Open Theists don't play up) is vital to understanding how to answer their contentions. They have been answered before. At their core, Open Theists seek to make God more comfortable and fatherly by removing his sovereignty and omniscience; they make him the god of the possible (as they define the possible) rather than the God for whom all things are possible, and the god who takes risks rather than the God who knows the end from the beginning and works all things after the council of his own inscrutable will.

*Bound Only Once*, a group effort which aims at critiquing Open Theism, is headed up by Douglas Wilson (editor of *Credenda/Agenda*, and author of *Reformed Is not Enough*). Wilson seems to like people who enjoy writing, and make their writing enjoyable; people who "cannot ignore the aesthetic dimension when evaluating views of any sort, let alone theological" (31). These authors strike me as ones who are able to enjoy reading Oscar Wilde while not agreeing with him, and able to agree with Martin Luther while not enjoying his writing style.

*Bound Only Once* critiques Open Theism on three criteria: Beauty, Truth, and Goodness.

To evaluate a theological understanding by its ability to create or squelch beauty may strike some as being more subjective than theological debate ought to be. After all, isn't

beauty in the eye of the beholder? But there are real aesthetic differences which become undeniable. Consider the Open Theism understanding that in creating the world God was taking great risks, but that he had a "great chance of success and little possibility of failure," for "although sin was possible—given this sort of world—it simply was not plausible in view of the good environment God established and the love he bestowed" (Open Theist, John Sanders, quoted on page 177). When we hear this sort of thing we understand what Douglas Wilson means when he says, "the inability of those in the Openness of God camp to see how their portrayal of God *clanks*, is, at bottom, a failure of the imagination" (24).

The failure of Beauty in Open Theism is addressed as a hermeneutic failure. "For them every metaphor can and must be reduced down to a literal core before it can count as meaningful" (Douglas M. Jones, 46). Here Jones offers a wonderful and clear explication of reading and interpreting metaphor. Regarding references to God's body parts or his repenting or seeking information (as if he were ignorant), Jones says, "We conceivably have two options for interpretation; we could understand these in a truth-revealing metaphorical sense or immediately reduce them to syllogism fodder" (42). And his case is away from reductionism toward a fullness of meaning in the beauty of the metaphor.

Open Theism sprouted from the perceived need to bring theology up to date. As Open Theists Clark H. Pinnock and Robert C. Brow explain, "Evangelical theology does not seem to be keeping up with evangelical thinking in other areas such as biblical studies, missiology and psychology" (*Unbounded Love*, 10). They sought a new theology which would "win a hearing for our faith in the modern situation" (*Unbounded Love*, 181). Thus they began with the desired outcome in sight and molded a theology which they hoped would produce this outcome.

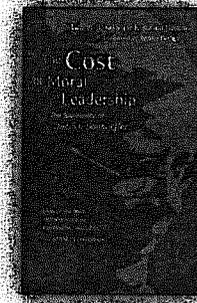
But Reformed theology always begins with the doctrine of God and draws all other doctrines in reference to him. Thus, *Bound Only Once* does not address Open Theism's understanding of Hell or baptism, but deals almost exclusively with the Openness failure to let God be God. In every chapter we

find the eleven contributors defending God's right to know and rule the future with omnipotence. Until God is again allowed to sit on his holy throne those other questions are not very important.

Thankfully, the Open Theism camp is unlikely to make much headway in Reformed circles because they are really a radical sect of Arminianism, a rebirth of Pelagianism. But there are many questions which they raise that the Reformed pastor will need to deal with regularly, such as those mentioned above of God repenting. And as Wilson reminds us:

The Bible requires Christian leaders to know such issues, requiring in effect that Christian shepherds know what a wolf looks like. A man can be orthodox and yet be disqualified for ministry. A man can like the sheep without being qualified to fight the wolves (220).

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***THE COST OF MORAL LEADERSHIP: THE SPIRITUALITY OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER***  
Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson  
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (2003), \$25.00

In this new introduction to the life and thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson explore the intrinsic relationship between Bonhoeffer's spirituality and his actions on behalf of peace and justice. Kelly and Nelson paint a clear and striking portrait: the man imprisoned in a concentration camp cell for resisting Hitler's totalizing empire is the man at prayer.

Throughout the course of the book, Kelly and Nelson survey a wide range of issues in Bonhoeffer's life and thought, including a helpful chapter on the neglected issue of the Holy

Spirit. But two themes run through the book and stand as perhaps the two focal points of Bonhoeffer's spirituality and action: the church as witness for peace, and the church as servant of the oppressed. As the authors make clear, both of these themes arise directly from Bonhoeffer's spirituality.

As Kelly and Nelson note, there is no one point to identify when Bonhoeffer became a pacifist. The influence of Jean Lasserre, a French pacifist whom Bonhoeffer befriended while at Union Theological Seminary in 1930–31 played a central role (11, 101–02). Lasserre challenged Bonhoeffer to take more seriously the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Early in his academic career Bonhoeffer had written an essay contrasting two different types of readings of Scripture: one scientific, the other prayerful. While Bonhoeffer never denied the usefulness of historical-critical readings of Scripture, it was this latter prayerful reading of Scripture that convinced Bonhoeffer he must follow the radical teaching of Jesus on peace.

What he discerned from his meditations on Scripture was that all loyalties, including national loyalties, were subsumed under the lordship of Christ. Insofar as the church is present in all cultures, taking up the sword against one nation is taking up the sword against Jesus himself (103). Moreover, the witness of the Spirit called the church to peaceableness. The German church employed a warped theology of revelation and of the Holy Spirit to justify its capitulation to the German state. The German church argued that creation had established certain orders of race, a revelation by the Spirit that was not negated by the revelation found in Jesus. Yet Bonhoeffer argued, if the Spirit proceeds from the Son, just as the church confesses and prays, then there is no divine revelation knowable apart from the Spirit *in Christ* (72–74). Bonhoeffer's prayerful, Spirit-led reading of Scripture in light of the church's confession convinced him that the church must be a witness for peace against the totalizing power of the state.

But not only was Jesus peaceable, he was a servant of the poor and oppressed. Bonhoeffer noted that Jesus did not appear as the conquering hero, but as "a beggar among beggars, as an outcast among outcasts, as despairing among the

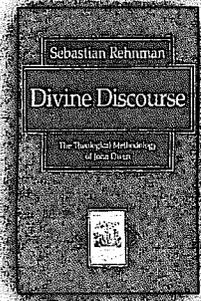
despairing, as dying among the dying" (38). What a proclamation to sound in the context of the Nazi idolization of the Arian race! From early on, Bonhoeffer preached to his congregations and taught in his classes that the church was to exist as a servant to the oppressed and despised. Bonhoeffer's actions on behalf of the poor and oppressed, just as his witness for peace, grew from the soil of regular prayer and meditation. His contemplation on the life of Christ convinced him that the way of the cross was suffering with the oppressed. In the crucified Christ, God identifies himself with the weak and oppressed. A central motivation in Bonhoeffer's participation in the plot to kill Hitler was his insistence that costly discipleship meant suffering for the sake of the oppressed (177–78). Authentic spirituality meant actively opposing the Nazi extermination of the Jews and the other "undesirables." What else would a God who makes himself vulnerable on the cross have disciples do?

Kelly and Nelson write both for the professional academic theologian and for the congregation. No easy task to be sure, they nonetheless successfully achieve both aims. For the academic theologian they have made explicit the intrinsic relationship between Bonhoeffer's spirituality and his actions for justice through careful and detailed readings of Bonhoeffer's writings and personal accounts from some of those closest to him. As they note in their preface, this is the first full-length book to mine that relationship, and as such is an important resource for academics (xiv). Kelly and Nelson trace this link, however, in prose that should be clear and readable to well-informed, non-professional theologians. Furthermore, at the end of the book they include questions for each chapter to facilitate discussion for church groups.

In the context of the congregation, Kelly and Nelson's book is a call for the prayerful faithfulness of the church, specifically faithfulness in service and peaceable witness. Yet, Bonhoeffer's participation in the plot to kill Hitler complicates the picture of the church's peaceable witness. Kelly and Nelson argue that in the face of the overwhelming evil of the Nazi regime Bonhoeffer began to take more seriously Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism (108). Perhaps. Yet,

throughout Bonhoeffer's martyr's tale, the truly tragic character is the German church. In the end, since the German church had capitulated and even the confessing church had gone soft, Bonhoeffer was left without a place to stand. Perhaps Bonhoeffer's complicity in the assassination plot, then, says more about the unfaithfulness of the German church in mid-century than it does about the need to qualify peaceable witness with Christian realism. In that case, *The Cost of Moral Leadership* through an exploration of the life and thought of Bonhoeffer is a (perhaps unintended?) prophetic call for the church to take seriously the peaceable witness of Jesus Christ. In light of his mediations on the life of Jesus, Bonhoeffer would have expected nothing less.

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***DIVINE DISCOURSE: THE THEOLOGICAL  
METHODOLOGY OF JOHN OWEN***

Sebastian Rehnman  
Grand Rapids: Baker (2002)  
215 pages, paper, \$19.99

In recent years, significant work has been carried out by a number of scholars on the development of Reformed theology, demonstrating areas of continuity and discontinuity between medieval thought, the theology of the Reformation, and post-Reformation Protestant scholasticism. Scholars like Richard Muller, Willem van Asselt, Tony Lane, and Carl Trueman have been at the heart of this work. They have helped to fill gaps in our knowledge through painstaking analysis of the primary texts, and they have demonstrated that many caricatures of Reformed theology have been simplistic and entirely misguided. One example of their work has been the discrediting of the oft-repeated neo-orthodox assertion that the theol-

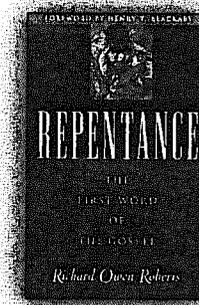
ogy of the Reformers was christological, whereas the theology of the Protestant scholastics was predestinarian.

This book by Sebastian Rehnman is part of that broader work and has been published by Baker Academic in their series titled, "Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought," of which Muller is the general editor. The book is based on Rehnman's doctoral dissertation and is a complex analysis of John Owen's "prolegomena." Owen, of course, was one of the most significant English Puritan writers, as well as a significant historical figure, having been chaplain to Oliver Cromwell and vice chancellor of Oxford University.

Rehnman bases his examination of Owen on three primary texts, and his work is divided up into six chapters: (1) "The Concept of Theology"; (2) "Natural and Supernatural Knowledge of God"; (3) "The Nature of Theology"; (4) "Faith and Reason"; (5) "Belief and Evidence"; and (6) "The Organization of Theology: A Federal Model." He demonstrates a thorough acquaintance with Owen's work, as well as the writings of those who influenced Owen and also Owen's contemporaries. His scholarship is impressive and his conclusions persuasive.

This is not a book for the faint hearted or for the casual reader! To study Rehnman's work requires care, and a knowledge of the field would be useful. It will be read mostly by other scholars, although those who value the writings of Owen and are prepared to persevere will find significant value in the book.

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***REPENTANCE: THE FIRST WORD  
OF THE GOSPEL***

Richard Owen Roberts  
Wheaton: Crossway Books (2002)  
368 pages, paper, \$19.99

Richard Owen Roberts is known to many evangelicals for his publishing work. I was personally indebted to him for republishing the complete works of Thomas Boston just as I was about to begin my Ph.D. dissertation on Boston! Others will know him as a pastor and preacher, or for his involvement in establishing the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College. Here, in this volume we see Roberts the writer.

This book on the doctrine of repentance is no dry academic thesis; rather it is a passionate call for a renewed emphasis on sound biblical teaching concerning the vital importance of repentance in the life of the believer. The heart of the pastor shines through and, although quite a long book, it is essentially an evangelistic tract. The tone is set by the "Letter to the Reader," calling on men and women to respond in repentance and faith to the gospel. Roberts clearly believes that repentance has been neglected, or watered down, in recent evangelical preaching, not least through attempts to make the gospel "seeker friendly" or to take away any offence which might be caused. He is scathing in his denunciation of all such moves.

Those who are looking for a careful theological study of the doctrine will not find it here. To give only two examples, there is no serious discussion of the place of repentance in the *ordo salutis* and no sustained analysis of the theological relationship between repentance and regeneration. To be fair, however, theological analysis is not Roberts' primary purpose. His concern is to provide a call to the unconverted (and to the unrepentant converted!) and to re-anchor the church to its moorings in Scripture.

The book is full of personal examples of the points he is making and many good pastoral examples of problems that arise when repentance is neither preached nor practiced. I was touched by the seriousness and the passionate concern of the author.

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**THE LAST THINGS: RESURRECTION,  
JUDGMENT AND GLORY**

Donald G. Bloesch

Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press  
(2004)

336 pages, cloth, \$27.00

Donald Bloesch's latest publication brings his monumental seven-volume Christian Foundations series to its conclusion. These seven volumes constitute one of the most significant publications of evangelical theology and will impact the evangelical community for years to come. Furthermore, this series stands alone as the most thorough contribution to evangelicalism produced in recent years. This final volume in the series has been fittingly dedicated to Reformation & Revival Ministries, which is most worthy of the appreciation of this great theologian of the church.

This seventh volume contains many fine insights and significantly adds to the discussion of eschatology. However, while there is much that I appreciate, there are also parts of it that I have reservations about. It is for this reason that I discuss this work with the kind of appreciations and reservations that this highly significant North American evangelical had for the great Karl Barth. The purpose of this approach is not so I can compare myself with Dr. Bloesch (if that were at all possible), but to demonstrate that while one might disagree with some aspects of a theologian's work, this does not preclude that theologian from being the subject of immense appreciation. Indeed, to dialogue with any theologian, on the basis of agreeing with everything they say, amounts more to a culture of dependence than an engagingly rich theology seeking to mature into full bloom.

**APPRECIATIONS**

Bloesch's theology has long been appreciated for its scholarly depth and insightful reflections. This latest work is

no exception. Born into a heritage of European evangelicalism, Bloesch's theology is influenced by Reformed and Lutheran Pietism, North American evangelicalism, and the theology of Karl Barth. These influences amount to a rich collection of sources that gives Bloesch's theology the thoroughness of scholastic orthodoxy and the heart of a true revivalist. Consequently, he is not only an academic in dialogue with the past, but also a prophet with a concern for the present state of the church. It is with this last point that I begin my list of many appreciations.

Bloesch is right when he challenges many of the sociological approaches to church life practiced today. Indeed, when social analysis stands by itself, it "is inadequate for defining the role of the church in the plan of salvation" (17). To be sure, what must be endeavored by Christians today is the search for a renewed church. Bloesch's theology of Word and Spirit is evident in his alternative affirmation which asserts that "doctrinal purity must be united with the passion for inwardness if the church is to maintain continuity with the apostolic tradition and present a credible message to a secularised world" (23). The key to this renewal, claims Bloesch, "lies in bringing the church into the service of the eschatological kingdom of God" (24). He proposes that this kind of "eschatological Christianity" will work within institutional structures and social forms (26), but will be primarily anchored in the transcendent, through the Scriptural witness and the ministry of a believer's community (27). Important to Bloesch's proposal is the rejection of liberalism, which regards the Christian way as one among others, and fundamentalism, which is sectarian in nature and focuses on issues "that no longer rivet the theological imagination" (26). Bloesch's alternative is for a dynamic and imaginative catholic evangelicalism that respects church tradition, while always being subordinate to the witness of Scripture. However, he is keen to point out that an "evangelical catholicity should by no means be confused with a restorationism that encourages the church to retreat to the past rather than grapple with the issues that presently confront both the church and the wider culture" (26).

Bloesch's discussion on "Light Against Darkness" is particularly engaging. He is at his inspirational best as he describes the victory of Christ, rightly affirming that through "the cross and resurrection victory of Christ the powers of darkness were dethroned" (53-54). However, Bloesch is no triumphalist. He rightly points to the scriptural declaration that while the powers have been dethroned, they "continue to rule on the basis of a lie that they still have real power" (54). To be sure, the "decisive battle has already taken place in Christ's cross and resurrection victory." Bloesch's well-balanced reading of Scripture is evident in his contention that while "the outcome of the spiritual war has been decided, the warfare continues because the devil persists in fighting on. The day of total victory is still ahead of us and will not take place until Christ comes again in glory in order to consummate his kingdom" (54). On this great day, "time itself will be taken up into eternity" (63). Therefore "the proper attitude of the church is one of expectation and waiting" (63).

Bloesch also dedicates a significant amount of time to the important discussion of the millennium. This is a highly constructive and informative discussion that covers the main opinions that have been held by the various factions within evangelicalism. He provides a brilliant overview as he succinctly summarises the situation.

Those who adhere to a millennial kingdom in earthly history inaugurated by the cataclysmic coming of Jesus Christ in power and glory are known as premillennialists. Those who contend for a millennial period of peace and justice prior to Christ's visible coming in glory are postmillennialists. Those who conceive of a millennial kingdom already realized in history in the flowering of the church are amillennialists (88).

However, Bloesch believes that the time is right for a new statement on the millennium. The necessary prerequisite for this is in the understanding that Revelation 20 "is a symbol of divine manifestation in history" and not a literal thousand years (109). Consequently, Bloesch opposes "a premillennial-

ism that makes the kingdom of Christ wholly future and in effect abandons this world to the devil." He differs from the amillennial position because he sees "the kingdom of Christ surging forward within history." Against the postmillennialists he rejects the idea "of a steady progression of righteousness in history" (111). In contrast, Bloesch views the millennium "as being realized in the present and consummated in the future" (112). However, the millennium does not stand at the core of the Christian hope. Bloesch gives wise counsel in his biblical admonition that the Christian is not expected to wait for the coming of the millennium, but to hope in the coming of the Lord (112).

Bloesch follows his discussion on the millennium with the important topic of the resurrection of the dead. Here Bloesch not only follows a convincingly biblical argument, he rightly states that Christ's resurrection is firstly an event of salvation (177), which is of fundamental importance and consequence for the Christian. Although the resurrection occurred at one point in time, its implications resound throughout history. Indeed, at "the time of our death we are raised up to life" and will be invested with "glorified bodies" (127). However, when Christ comes again, to judge both the living and the dead, "we will be re clothed with a glorified body that is eternal" (131).

Bloesch titles his ninth chapter: "Predestined to Glory." It is one of the best presentations of a Reformed doctrine of predestination written in recent years, and Bloesch's finest statement on this topic. He sounds a distinctly balanced biblical note in his statement that while the Bible staunchly affirms divine predestination, it is "nearly always joined to human freedom and is realized through human free decision" (175). Indeed, tradition has been faithful to Scripture "when it has sought to hold together the announcement of God's boundless grace and God's command to his people to work out their salvation in fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12)" (176). Bloesch then astutely expands the theme of grace and responsibility to include the events of history and the experience of life. His matured wisdom is seen in the comment that "God does not expressly will everything that happens, but the whole panora-

ma of history is under God's direction. God does not will evil, but he brings good out of evil" (176). Further to this observation is his discerning reading of Ephesians 1:11-12, which instructs that "God does not determine whatever comes to pass, but God unfailingly accomplishes his purpose according to his will" (176). Indeed, "predestination is the provisional overseeing of world history guiding the historical process toward its fulfilment in the new heaven and the new earth." Bloesch contends that a biblical theology will envisage God as not so much the infinite cause of everything, but the creative, providential hand that directs "the course of world history" (180).

Bloesch continues his discussion by working through the meaning of double predestination. The classic Calvinist assertion is that God predestines some to salvation and others to damnation. Bloesch challenges this thesis by laying the foundation of his theology on a thorough exposition of Scripture. Key to this is the observation that while Jacob was loved and Esau hated (Romans 9:13), Esau becomes reunited with Jacob and regains the favor of God (Genesis 33:1-15). Bloesch agrees with T. F. Torrance that "one of the calamities of traditional exposition and interpretation of Calvin's theology has been, by means of arid logical forms, to make Calvin's own distinctions too clean and too rigid" (178). Bloesch prefers Barth's Reformed view in which "God takes our reprobation upon himself in the person of Jesus Christ so that Christ becomes both the elect and the reprobate" (179). Bloesch also reflects a sound and balanced exposition of Scripture when he claims that predestination "is both conditional and unconditional. His election is not dependent on our works and merits but flows out of his unconditional grace. At the same time, the efficacy of his predestination depends partly on how we respond to his invitation to take up the cross and follow Christ" (181).

The influence of Karl Barth on Bloesch's theology of predestination is particularly evident in his strongly christological definition. Based on his reading of Ephesians 1:4-6, Bloesch rightly asserts that in "the deepest sense Jesus Christ himself is the predestined one" (181). Therefore predestination is not a

fate imposed on humanity, but "the unfolding of triumphal grace through our faith, repentance and obedience" (182). Election is consequently both universal and particular.

It is universal in its outreach and particular in its efficacy for faith. All are elected to be in the service of Christ, but only some are destined for fellowship with Christ. The invitation goes out to all, but adoption is only for some. Unbelief is the reason for being barred from fellowship with Christ. God is the cause of our salvation; unbelief is the cause of our damnation (183).

The influence of Barth is also evident in Bloesch's soundly biblical contention that

God's predestination extends to all, but it will not be realized in the same way for all. All people are predestined to life and to the service of God's glory. God's reconciliation and predestination reach out to all mortals. Yet only those who respond in faith will be acknowledged as sons and daughters of the most high God (216).

Bloesch adds to this by denouncing Reformed theologies that promote divine fatalism. Alternatively, he eschews a sound biblical balance of divine will and human responsibility. For him, fate "envision[s] a world without hope for real change because everything is bound to an inexorable transcendent necessity" (252). In contrast to this, Bloesch promotes the notion of providence, which "affirms a world that is brimming with hope because it is being directed by a moral governor who enables his subjects to act in freedom" (252). The result is not a God who compels people to act in a particular way, but one who liberates so that we can "act according to his will and purpose" (253). The Lord does not ordain whatever comes to pass, but he does give moral direction in a world of chaos (253). Since people are free to respond in a variety of ways, not all respond to their predestination positively. The prospect of hell stands as their destiny.

Bloesch adds nothing new to his already established doc-

trine of hell. However, while previous works cover this most important topic, this latest publication presents his most current statement on the issue. The basis of his argument is that hell is not another kingdom that lies outside the dominion of God (233). Bloesch replaces the notion of hell as a fiery torture chamber that produces pain, with a place where pain is brought about "due to the presence of God rather than his absence" (217). Indeed, hell is still a place of fire, however, Bloesch believes that this fire is not "outside the compass of God's love" (219). This means that while some will be excluded from God's salvation, "none will be excluded from his love" (222). To be sure, "hell is the pain of knowing that God will eternally frustrate our inveterate desire to have our own way" (220). However, it is the current hope of the Christian with which Bloesch concludes.

Bloesch appropriately concludes his chapters with the Christian's hope. He rightly states that the Christian's ground and content of hope is Jesus Christ (244). This has immediate and significant impact upon the Christian life. Bloesch makes the important observation that life "can be meaningful and fruitful because the living God of history is working within our decisions and indecisions to bring about a new world and a new humanity" (253).

While I believe that Bloesch's final volume contains much that is to be appreciated it is also true to say that there are some ideas in this publication that I find hard to accept, and therefore have considerable reservations.

#### RESERVATIONS

The eighth chapter of this work, "The Communion of Saints," starts with the assessment that the communion of saints referred to in the Apostles' Creed applies to "the whole company of the faithful—on this side of heaven and on the other side of death" (155). While this comment may contain a certain degree of acceptance, Bloesch's conclusion that there is a "mystic communion of the people of God that bridges the barrier between earth and heaven" (161) lacks any real biblical support. Indeed, Bloesch appears to depart from his well-trod

theology of Word and Spirit with the contention that Christians are not only in dialogue and interaction with the saints departed, but are assisted in this life by them (161). To be sure, Bloesch believes that Christians may request the aid of the saints in their prayers to God and Christ (165). Indeed, he advocates that Christians should not only pray for assistance, but also that the dead progress toward their final glory (167).

I believe that the basis of Bloesch's problem here is that he clearly departs from his established method of Word and Spirit. The basis of his argument is not Scripture that has been illuminated by the Spirit, but sacred tradition that has come to light in the aftermath of the Canon's completion. Bloesch's presentation, while providing historically fascinating insights, does not refer to Scripture in any substantial way. While Bloesch advocates that "a full-orbed doctrine of the communion of saints is possible only if we appeal to both holy Scripture and holy tradition" (172), it is clear that he primarily relies on tradition to sustain his theology of the communion of saints. Indeed, the Scriptures Bloesch refers to (for example, Colossians 1:2; Hebrews 12:23; Matthew 27:52-53; Revelation 6:9-11; Matthew 17:1-13) acknowledge the reality of a company of saints, but do not support most of what he has to say about an established dialogue that may exist between them and Christians in this world.

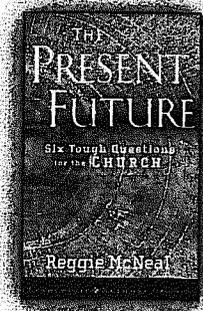
Another area of Bloesch's work that I have difficulty with regards the possibility of salvation in hell. While Bloesch maintains that hell is everlasting, he does not see this as precluding "the possibility of some being finally restored to full health and salvation" (227). Bloesch further holds out that he does not teach "the wholesale emptying of hell," but he does still hold out the hope that some, perhaps many, might be "reclaimed for salvation" (241). The basis for Bloesch's argument has more to do with assumptions about the character of God, and how he will subsequently act, than on any substantial scriptural argument. Consequently, Bloesch is able to state that because God is love and loves all, he also pursues all into the darkness of sin and hell. Therefore the future is open rather than closed (240).

## CONCLUSION

Bloesch's seventh and final volume of his Christian Foundations series completes one of the great theological endeavors of recent time. Bloesch is an evangelical writer for our current era whose work resonates with the highest scholarship, a mature pastoral heart, and the discernment of an elder. This last volume reflects Bloesch's years of experience as a profound academic who seeks to be guided by the Word and the Spirit. While I do not agree with every point, I agree with most of Bloesch's insights and affirm that this work is a must read for all.

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### *THE PRESENT FUTURE: SIX TOUGH QUESTIONS FOR THE CHURCH*

Reggie McNeal

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (2003)

151 pages, cloth, \$23.95

The author, director of leadership development for the South Carolina Baptist Convention, has written a book he was "not thrilled about writing."

Ministry and the church have been my world. But it is a world that I increasingly find difficult to feel at home in because it lacks spiritual purpose and missional vitality. . . . It has, instead, substituted its own charter of church as a clubhouse where religious people hang out with other people who think, dress, behave, vote, and believe like them.

As he says, "This book is not for you if you are content with the way things are."

For those who are not content, McNeal's confrontal commentary is just what the doctor ordered: a forced exercise pro-

gram for thinking rightly about the state of the church. He exegetes the church (text) in relationship to the culture (context), especially in light of the dramatic changes that have somehow been ignored or denied by so many in leadership.

He sheds light on the drift of our culture:

The decade of the 1960s threw church leaders a curve. The culture began a decided march away from church values, and church leaders didn't know how to deal with a church that moved from a privileged position to a church in exile in an increasingly alien culture.

And he also shows the influence of culture upon evangelical churches:

The most notable trend was the closing down of the mom-and-pop operations and moving to the mall and, even later, to the supercenter. This was the rise of the megachurch, a phenomenon of the final third of the twentieth century. With rare exception the "growth" here was the cannibalization of the smaller-membership churches by these emerging superchurches.

What is the impact of these cultural shifts? McNeal answers:

The rise of the celebrity-status church culture (not the child of the church growth movement, but a development of a church culture parallel to American pop culture) has created thousands of "losers," pastors and church leaders who are not serving in high-profile, high-growth churches. Consequently, a large part of the leadership of the North American church suffers from debilitation and even depression fostered by a lack of significance. The army of God has a lot of demoralized leaders.

McNeal contends we have moved from a several decades long obsession with church growth to an emphasis on church health that must now transition to an outward, missional, focus.

I would argue that the church growth movement is a transition in the North American church between the old church culture and the emerging culture. It introduced a concern for growth and a missiological approach to church. Unfortunately, it fell victim to an idolatry as old as the Tower of Babel, the belief that we are the architects of the work of God.

I think it is time to wake up and smell the coffee. We can keep on this track just to watch even more dismal results (the transfer of Christians from the dinghies to the cruise ships is pretty well complete). Unfortunately, several decades of the church growth movement's emphasis on methodologies have conditioned church leaders to look for the next program, the latest "model," the latest fad in ministry programming to help "grow" the church. I am constantly asked, "What's next?" The focus of the church is on itself, on what it takes to succeed.

Churches that understand the realities of the "present future" are shifting the target of ministry efforts from church activity to community transformation. This is what McNeal means when he speaks of turning the church inside out.

The application of McNeal's insights relates more specifically to church structure or style:

I am afraid that many North American Christians, particularly evangelical . . . feel we need to convict people of their sin and cause them to repent and change their lives. We want to tell people, "You're all screwed up. You need to clean up your act or you're going to hell." Now I don't disagree that God is in the life-changing business, nor do I diminish the issue of sin and its consequences. But our pickup lines need some serious work. I'm talking about actually gaining a hearing for the gospel in the streets instead of being flipped off.

This book provokes me to wonder if the reformation we seek requires both a backward reflection, upon God's work in history, and a forward look, into the ways God is reframing his church for the future. Shouldn't we expect a twenty-first century reformation of the church to look and feel unique;

different than anything we have seen in history? Somehow, we must learn at least as much from the "present future" as from the distant past.

McNeal also makes me think the revival we desperately need begs for a similar dual emphasis: not backward and forward but downward and upward. We must call for repentance for our sinful depravity (downward), but in the context of realizing our spiritual dignity (upward). In falling short of God's glory we have not only sinned against God's rules and regulations, but we have failed to live up to the dignity and destiny of being created in the image of God. Is it possible the current culture needs the latter in order to truly comprehend and respond to the former?

*The Present Future* is not a book to read but rather a book to wrestle with. Even where you disagree, you'll be forced to think with greater clarity. The author does not offer models to emulate but ideas on which to ruminate. And the result can only be Spirit-inspired answers to questions that are, sadly, too tough for some to seriously and spiritually consider. The gospel is at stake:

Bottom line: We've got to take the gospel to the streets. This is the only appropriate missional response to the collapse of the church culture. I am not talking about short forays into port off of the cruise ship. I am speaking of an intentional 24/7 church presence in the community, not tied to church real estate: office buildings, malls, school campuses, sports complexes, storefronts, homes, apartment buildings, and community centers. This will be the only way we get the gospel out to people who have no intention of coming to church for their spiritual pursuits. We need to go where people are already hanging out and be prepared to have conversations with them about the great love of our lives. This will require our shifting our efforts from growing churches into transforming communities. They're not coming to us. We've got to go to them.

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