

Reviews



HEBREWS: A NEW TRANSLATION WITH INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY, by Craig R. Koester. Anchor Bible 36. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2001. \$47.50 (cloth).

Here is a commentary on Hebrews by a scholar who has spelunked into ancient and modern interpretations of the epistle, but has not on that account omitted to give the commentary his own stamp.

First of all, author Koester has made clear to the reader how he will shape his work. Without derogating other approaches, he has decided to craft it from the rhetorical perspective. He writes:

This commentary offers an alternative to [the various] approaches by using classical rhetorical patterns to identify the general structure of Hebrews. (84)

Accordingly, the commentary is divided into the standard elements of the *exordium* or introduction, the *proposition* or definition of the issue, and the *peroration* or final component. The underlying assumption is that the epistle has less the character of a concentrically arranged argument than of a sermon or oral address of some forty or fifty minutes in length (80, 81, 175). Assigning rhetorical character to Hebrews allows Koester to draw on Aristotle, Quintilian, the elusive Longinus, and other ancient rhetoricians to identify the epistle's structure. Each section of the commentary is filled with references to classical devices used by the "speaker" to prepare, persuade, warn, or encourage his listeners. For example, in the speaker's favorable comparison of Jesus with Aaron in 5:5-10, Koester notes the use of "amplification," a device calcu-

lated to indicate superiority, and directs the reader to Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (298). Or, in the speaker's word that "it is ordained for human beings to die once" (9:27), he registers a "commonplace," a device that enhances the argument since designed to win the listener's approval, and refers the reader to the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, a work on oratory from the first century B.C. known to Cicero (429). This is not the first time a New Testament document has been read from the perspective of persuasive speech, but the first time the entire Epistle to the Hebrews has been given such a reading. The rhetorical approach gives Koester leave to assign only minimal space to the old wearying debates regarding the author's identity, the epistle's provenance, or the ethnic background of its addressees, and rather to concentrate on how the speaker's audience would have related to the dominant Greco-Roman culture, the Jewish subculture, and the Christian community (48). Giving attention to just this aspect of the commentary is well worth our effort, and just this aspect may well extend its life.

According to Koester, the situation addressed by the speaker is two-sided. On the one hand, his listeners (related to the circle of Christians surrounding Paul?) appear to have reached a phase of conflict with society where overt persecution has given way to verbal harassment. On the other, they appear to be in danger of "drift," for reasons that may not have been apparent to the speaker or his listeners (64, 208). In any case, the glory promised by God to his people is contradicted by their inglorious experience of life in the world. To this problem of the disparity between present experience

and future hope the speaker tailors his response. In Koester's words,

the central question addressed by Hebrews is whether God will bring people to the glory for which he created them. (291)

The frame or context of the speaker's response consists of three great cycles of images, the first having to do with the sojourn of God's people in the desert, the second with their entry into the sanctuary, and the third with their journey toward Zion, the heavenly city (98, 262). Jesus Christ assumes pride of place in each cycle, first as the one who received glory through what he suffered, second as the one whose suffering enables the approach to God, and finally as the one who endured suffering for the sake of the joy that lay before him. By directing his listeners' attention to Jesus' death and exaltation, the "defining element in the end times," (106-107, 118, 188), the speaker summons them to hold fast to God's promise that he will bring them to their goal. His aim is thus to evoke from his hearers a renewed confession of faith (212). But for this faith to endure it must be placed in the Son of God who endures, not in the visible world that renders it prey to death and decay.

For these cycles of images the speaker is obviously dependent upon the Old Testament, but not without adopting a critical stance. If the crucified and exalted Christ cannot be understood apart from the Old Testament, it is truer still that the Old Testament cannot be adequately grasped apart from the crucified and exalted Christ. In fact,

the shadows of the exalted Christ fall on the pages of the Old Testament, allowing the reader to discern in them something of the shape of Christ himself. (117)

Or, in another figure, the Old Testament is the "lens" through which the work of Christ is viewed (241).

According to Koester, the speaker is also acquainted with Hellenistic-Jewish ideas; with Philo, for example, or with those dis-

tinctions between "shadow" and reality reminiscent of Platonic thought (cf. 59-60, 98-99). But again, it is the particular events of Jesus' crucifixion and exaltation, those "fundamental moments of revelation," whose significance the Old Testament, Jewish wisdom, or Alexandrian thought are made to serve, and not the reverse (63, 178, 188).

The writing of a commentary involves an incredible amount of work, for which reason many eschew it and rationalize their lack of stomach for it with asserting that its day is done. In defiance of current bias, Koester has thrown himself into the exposition of one of the principal theologians of the cross in the New Testament. Not only at the level of scholarship, but also, and more important, at the level to which Koester's "speaker" hoped to bring his hearers, his work encouraged me.

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THE BARTHIAN REVOLT IN MODERN THEOLOGY: THEOLOGY WITHOUT WEAPONS, by Gary Dorrien. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000. Pp. 239. \$29.95 (paper).

In his good moods, Barth liked to call existentialist theologies "flat foot theologies" (*Plattfusstheologie*). In his polemic against liberal theology, and especially the Bultmannian program of demythologization, he proclaimed that all those theologies that relied on outside philosophical categories for their interpretation of the word were bound to be misguided and stagnant.

One might more aptly identify Barth's own theology as "fat foot theology," as he is known and mentioned most often for his prolific output (primarily *Church Dogmatics*). His theology is "fat" both in its breadth on the bookshelf and its depth of theological acuity. This being the case, it is all the more welcome and satisfying that a historian and theologian of Gary Dorrien's calibre has written a brief yet insightful look

into the history of Barth and the movement he inspired.

The exactness and thoroughness of Dorrien's examination is exemplary. He succeeds in covering the historical context, the various theological moves made by Barth during the course of his career, as well as the theological movements of his interlocutors. He clearly and dramatically explicates the movement, and in the process turns intellectual history into a page-turner.

Theology Without Weapons is the third in a four-part series by Dorrien on modern theology. The first two, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, and *The Word as True Myth: Interpreting Modern Theology*, exhibit this same ability for keen historical detail mixed with engaged theological reflection. Dorrien presents theological history as a lively dialogue amongst living, breathing, and exciting characters, and it is this use of characters in conversation (he makes frequent use of epistolary material) that makes Dorrien's work readable and fascinating.

Dorrien's reason for devoting an entire text of this series to "the Barthian revolt" in modern theology is clear. Dorrien makes the claim on historical and theological grounds that Barth represents in a crystallized way a total break with the liberal theological tradition of the nineteenth century. "Twentieth-century theology begins with [Barth's] wartime judgment that he did not believe in the same god as his revered teachers" (36). This separation with his "teachers," primarily Schleiermacher and Hermann, finds compelling expression quite early in his career in his commentary on Romans. "Barth's first-edition *Römerbrief* was published in December 1918. With its appearance, twentieth-century theology begins" (51).

Dorrien's major theses, which find support and expression in later chapters, are succinctly stated in his lucid introduction. First, central to Barth's project was the "primacy of the Spirit-illuminated Word" apart from intruding philosophical or historico-critical strategies of any sort (5). Second,

Barth's emphasis, following Hermann, that Scripture is "self-authenticating" and "self-revealing" provided the Barthian revolt with its spiritual strength. Third, although Barth's theology has been quite influential, it lacks what Dorrien calls "accumulative influence" (6). Finally, although Barth's theology has much in common with his neo-orthodox epigones, and indeed contains many orthodox elements, "his theological vision was always more subversive, open, and dialectical than the school-movement he inspired" (13). In these theses, and the chapters that set out to support them, Dorrien is not merely re-pristinating the founder of a theology buried by his own interpreters, but is instead engaging in a historical examination and theological dialogue that may have the effect of helping Barth speak anew in the contemporary theological context.

Chapter 1, "Twilight of the Gods," describes Barth's early immersion in nineteenth-century liberal theology, and his ultimate rejection of it. Because so many of his liberal instructors capitulated to the overwhelming force of German war idealism, Barth set himself a new task over against such giants in the field as Troeltsch, Ritschl, and Hermann. In his introduction to the second edition of *Romans* he states, "Schleiermacher undoubtedly did a good job. It is not enough to know that another job has to be done; what is needed is the ability to do it at least as well as he did his" (45). In this stunning pronouncement, Barth identifies his roots, shows his continued respect for Schleiermacher, and then sets himself the incredibly daunting task of doing one better a theologian who himself transformed the Protestant theological landscape.

Chapter 2, identified dually as "Dialectics of the Word" and "Crisis Theology," presents Barth's thundering rebuttal of the liberal tradition. Here we arrive at such famous phrases as "the strange new world of the Bible" and "God is pure negation." His theology finds expression in his successive editions of *Romans*, and Dorrien identifies

Barth's new, and sometimes surprising, theological influences, such as Franz Overbeck, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky. With the added influence of the Blumhardts and their particular focus on eschatology, Barth came to the conclusion that "only a kingdom-oriented eschatological Christianity bears any true relation to Christ...but for the kingdom to become an actual possibility to theology, 'there must come a crisis that denies all human thought'" (66).

As a result of his rethinking the Pauline message, and his reading of these radical, critical, eschatological, and dialectical thinkers, he made what many considered to be a rather surprising move. In order to focus on God as the subject of revelation, he turned his focus to dogmatics. Dorrien notes, "He made the work of preaching God's Word the focal point of dogmatics" (75). In his *Church Dogmatics* he included a substantial prolegomenal section that breathed new life into the discipline, and he reordered many of the major doctrinal themes (for instance, placing the doctrine of Scripture *after* the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation). The result, according to Dorrien, was "as dramatic a transformation of the theological landscape as Christian history has ever witnessed" (80).

Chapter 3, "Self-Authenticating?" is especially fascinating for its historical context. It is a detailed account of how theologians function while fascism is on the rise and world wars are past and imminent. The irony, in the case of Barth, was that the historical context of Nazism increased his conviction that paganizing ideologies, philosophical support systems, historico-critical methods, and apologetic strategies all compromise theology. It is in this context that Barth developed his notion of the sufficiency of revelation, the belief that a word-faithful theology will brook no "and"—not revelation *and* reason, nor God *and* anything. "The only way to keep the demons out, [Barth] exhorted, was to be relentlessly one-sided" (106).

This is not to say, as Dorrien points out, that theology is somehow detached from

the world, from culture or history or philosophy, but rather, over against all of these things theology maintains the primacy of the word alone as self-sufficient and self-authenticating. Indeed, Barth's authoring of the Barmen Declaration, his refusal to sign the loyalty oath to Hitler, and his joining the German Social Democratic Party in 1931 all witness to how Barth's theology led inevitably to worldly engagement, but in a much more radical way than simple assent to the ideology of the moment. As Barth stated later in regard to his decision to join the GSDP, "I thought it right to make it clear with whom I would like to be imprisoned and hanged" (101).

Chapter 4, "Otherworldly Positivism?" shows the extent to which modern theology is indebted to Barth, yet simultaneously critical of him. Dorrien lists a host of theologians, from contemporaries such as Tillich and Niebuhr, younger theologians like Bonhoeffer and Thielicke, on down to modern theologians such as Pannenberg and Gilkey, all who have judged "that Barth led modern theology into a ghettoizing revelational positivism" (130). The critiques are many and varied. Tillich called Barth's theology a "sophisticated form of supernaturalism" (132). Thielicke called his theology a docetic, magical concept of the word. Niebuhr identified it as an "otherworldly evangelicalism [that] negated the church's capacity to defend Christian belief from its modern critics" (135). Brunner and Bonhoeffer, both of whom were closer to Barth in their theological programs, had equally indicting criticisms. Although Dorrien identifies these criticisms as being, in many cases, a way for each critic to create a foil for their own theological project, the cumulative effect of the criticisms leads one to see Barth's isolation in the field he apparently dominated. The result, Dorrien notes, is that in the end Barth has become most influential amongst those who actually embrace the label of neo-orthodox positivism. Although Dorrien looks favorably upon many of these attempts, he also suggests that it is possible to appropriate Barth for

later generations in ways that need not acknowledge and accept this caricature.

After some concluding comments in chapter 4 that place Barth carefully in relation to his interpreters, Dorrien chooses for his concluding chapter, subtitled "History and the Open Word," to reflect once again on the course of Barth's career, this time with special attention paid to "the question of the relation of Christian resurrection faith to history" (167). Barth discovers that it is in submitting to the authority of the open word that one experiences the true freedom of faith. "The Word of God...disrupts and transcends all historical categories," and in this way "eludes human control" (177). As a result, our first knowledge of God is knowledge of God's hiddenness, known indirectly in Christ through the revelatory power of the Holy Spirit. This way of dogmatically formulating a theology of revelation centered around the open Word allows Barth to establish ways of speaking about Scripture as "non-historical history." Polemically positioned against "historical" forms of theology, he reads events of Scripture in a substantially different light. "In the case of the resurrection, Barth admonished, if one could historically demonstrate that the resurrection of Christ must have occurred, the thing that would be proven would not be the resurrection, for historical reason can demonstrate only that which it controls" (192). The resurrection is known, not out of historical certainty, but because the Word discloses it through the power of the Spirit.

One wishes that Dorrien would have dwelt more extensively on the revelatory action of the Spirit in Barth's theology, for it is pneumatology that focuses most appropriately on the differences of conviction between Barth and his theological opponents. Dorrien's recitation of the phrase "Spirit-illuminated Word" concentrates our attention correctly on Barth's particular approach to how the Word comes to us, but in the end, the final chapter converges more on a theology of the open Word than it does on Barth's development of the doctrine of

the Holy Spirit. With the renewal of pneumatological reflection at the end of the twentieth century, it is a bit unfortunate that Dorrien did not choose the theology of the Holy Spirit as a way of pinpointing a way past the liberal hang-up with how, as Brunner attempted to work out in his "eristics," there might be a "point of contact" that brings people to the capability of hearing the word. Certainly, this particular question belongs to the realm of pneumatology, and a pneumatological approach to the subject would help us see why Barth split with Brunner, as well as liberal theologians more generally, at exactly this point.

Nevertheless, Dorrien's examination of the "Barthian revolt" in modern theology is certain to intrigue and enlighten those readers who want to understand more clearly the vicissitudes of what is arguably one of the most convoluted portions of twentieth-century Protestant theology.

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LUTHER'S WORKS ON CD-ROM, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan, Hartmut T. Lehmann, and Helmut T. Lehmann. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2001. \$249.00.

The electronic version of *Luther's Works* presented by Libronix in cooperation with Augsburg Fortress and Concordia Publishing House will rank with the recent wonders of the world for pastors and scholars who are interested in Luther. At \$249.00, one can have the entire American Edition for less than the cost of a few volumes new. In addition it is matched with a powerful and relatively speedy (even for my 133 megahertz hot rod) platform and search engine that trounces the page-by-page search for that one precious and much-needed quotation from Luther that one can remember but not quite exactly.

It remains nonetheless a work in progress, and displays plenty of the expected glitches and annoying idiosyncrasies. A few

follow if only to alert the reader—and Libronix—of their existence. The lack (taken over from the printed edition) of a volume-by-volume listing of the particular works is annoying, especially when combined with a search function that does not reset itself as one moves from one source (volume) to another. Thus, I had run a search for “spirit” in volume 37, which contains the *Great Confession Concerning These Words...*, ended my session, turned off the computer, and then some days later decided to search for “cross” in the first volume of the sermons, only to discover that I was still in the previous search. Moreover, in order to conduct my new search, I had to remember and enter into the search field which volume of the whole was volume one of the sermons.

On the other hand, if I had gone to the very bottom of the display at “Home” (the publishers’ introduction), I would have encountered a search bar for the entirety of the American edition. Trying, I entered “ordination” and discovered that this word appears 63 times in the 55 volumes, and some of them contain very intriguing information regarding Luther’s views of this central matter, such as the following comments on Gen 28:17:

Then the church is defined here, what it is and where it is. For where God dwells, there the church is, and nowhere else; for the church is God’s house and the gate of heaven, where the entrance to eternal life and the departure from the earthly to the heavenly life are open. But where God has not spoken or dwelt, there the church has never been either. Today we are engaged in a great struggle with the completely corrupt papists concerning the church. They confidently arrogate its name and title to themselves and boast that the church is among them and indeed in their doctrines and ceremonies. But although we acknowledge that the church is among them—for they have Baptism, absolution, and the text of the Gospel, and there are many godly people among them—yet

if they want the addition that the pope and their pomp is the true church, we will by no means concede this. We confront them with this text, that God’s house and the church of God are the same, according to the statement in John 14:23: “If a man loves Me, he will keep My Word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.” His commandments must be there, and it is necessary to love them. For God does not make His abode unless we have His commandments. If the church is to be the house of God, it is necessary for it to have the Word of God and for God alone to be the Head of the household in this house.¹

Fifty-one seconds found the citation and an additional 73 seconds were required to copy it, and paste it into this paragraph, complete with the footnote. Unfortunately, however, there is no gain in knowing the exact title (and hence the context) of the work one wishes to consult. Thus, the request for *The Address to the Christian Nobility* drew only the sneering reply, “Invalid entry.”

Additionally, the program that ties the entire 55 volumes together allows one to take notes on screen while working with one of the texts. For example, the quotation two paragraphs above was written first with the note function, and the following quotation was inserted there by minimizing the “note” screen, highlighting the material, minimizing the sermon screen, then maximizing the “note” screen and copying it down, here (These words are from Luther’s first extant sermon, and their wooden character proves that he, too, was once a novice): “This sermon will have three parts. First I shall say something which is noteworthy by way of introduction; secondly, I shall draw a useful conclusion for our own instruction; and thirdly, I shall answer some questions with regard to what has been said.” The following information is helpfully provided: Luther, M. (1999, c1959). Vol. 51: Luther’s works, vol. 51: Sermons I (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther’s

¹Luther, M. (1999, c1968). Vol. 5: Luther’s works, vol. 5: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 26-30 (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther’s Works (Ge 28:18). Saint Louis:Concordia Publishing House.

Works (Vol. 51, Page 6). Philadelphia: Fortress Press. Thus, in this application the note is complete, with the bibliographical information added automatically, but it is appended, fulsomely, to the text itself and must therefore be cut and pasted somewhere else.

The lesson of these adventures should be obvious. Although the potential of the entire program is enormous, the researcher must work with it for some period of time, be willing to suffer some miscues along the way, and learn exactly how she or he wishes to use it. Libronix promises (and has already delivered on some of its pledge) to update the platform frequently and at no additional cost, but the user should be warned that as it stands the help function is next to useless. For example, at this writing there was not even an explanation of the difference between the “note” and what is termed a “work space.” In addition, users should be warned that actually installing the updates (go to “tools” and select “update”) frequently requires substantial time and includes automatically exiting the program and then the seemingly endless wait to reboot it. Finally, some word processors (including my MS Word of 1997) will not convert from the Libronix version of HTML; hence, the fact that the “note” (as in “taking notes”) function automatically self-saves accomplishes little more than to take up precious disk space. It cannot be opened. Again, beginning users are advised to consult the “Home” page whenever something puzzling does or does not happen, despite all reasonable expectations to the contrary.

On balance, and thanks to Concordia Publishing House, Augsburg Fortress, and those who funded the project, the Libronix edition of *Luther's Works* is essential to the working pastor and scholar—who, blessedly, are frequently the same people—and, as it is improved, it will only become more useful. Nonetheless, like all good things, it is subject to misuse and fully capable of promoting misunderstanding, discord, and whatever personal agendas abound in

preaching and writing at the time. Hence, two cautions seem necessary for everyone who puts this latest technological marvel to work.

In the first instance, one is reminded of the prominent North American theologian of whom one of his students reportedly said, “He only appears to be reading. Actually, he is looking for ammunition.” More than one person has used Luther in rather the manner that sometimes is reserved for Scripture. Such a one will be delighted to have his or her labors lightened by a powerful search engine. Hence, the old rules apply doubly in the case of this edition. Exact context, even if it be no more than time, place, and circumstance, is vital if any single utterance from Luther is to be rightly understood and construed for the edification of the reader or listener. No matter how sophisticated it may be, a powerful search engine cannot provide historical context.

The second caution is really an extension of the first, but with a few nuances. In the main, it addresses North American systematic theologians in particular, and above all those who seem singularly addicted to the American English language. Resting far-reaching conclusions on citations of *Luther's Works* without carefully checking them in their Latin and Early New High German (and sometimes macaronic) critical editions of the *Weimarer Ausgabe* simply will not do.

This admonition has the status of a commonplace, even if it is honored more in its breach than its observation. It nonetheless becomes doubly important when the source in question is drawn from the American Edition of Luther's works. The American English of this edition is not by any means identical with the language that people speak and write today. For example, Luther (and Melancthon) used the absolute German and Latin equivalent to the English word “ordination,” albeit sometimes reluctantly. But their word, “ordination,” carried none of the semi-sacramental sense that has been attached to it in common usage during the years

since the appearance of *Luther's Works*. Hence, systematic theological conclusions that would claim, on the basis of the American edition, some measure of faithfulness or compatibility with the reformers on this subject are suspect from the beginning. Thus, *Luther's Works* had their contexts; so too, Luther's works had theirs. Any arguments that do not recognize these facts ought to bear not the stamp *nihil obstat*, but the warning *caveat lector*.

The Libronix version of *Luther's Works* will become, if it is not already, a standard tool for all. It will also become even more useful as the updates to its platform become available. On balance, there can be no surprise that it shares a characteristic of all technological wonders. It is a wonderful resource that can be terribly misused. By the way, I will be stopping by the bookstore to pick up my copy of the Kolb and Wengert edition of *The Book of Concord* in cd-rom, also from Libronix. Suddenly the world has become a much kinder place for those of us with a passion for understanding Luther and early Lutheranism.

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THE PRAYER OF JABEZ: BREAKING THROUGH TO THE BLESSED LIFE, by Bruce H. Wilkinson. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2000. Pp. 96. \$9.99 (cloth).

"Oh, that you would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that your hand would be with me, and that you would keep me from evil." Just twenty-six words from the Bible. Bruce Wilkinson extracted this brief passage from 1 Chron 4:10, now increasingly known among American Christians as "the prayer of Jabez," and wrote a book about the spiritual importance of this prayer. His treatise on this petition to God has since sparked controversy in many Christian circles.

In *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking through to*

the Blessed Life, Wilkinson claims that this prayer is the key to finding favor with God. Some have rushed to buy the book and begun repeating the mantra so they too can tap into Wilkinson's discovery.

Much of the fascination with *Jabez* can be attributed to the American cultural spirit embedded in the prayer—with its emphasis on personal blessing and expediency. We are an extremely pragmatic people, and here is a five-second prayer seemingly guaranteed to get things. As one of my colleagues says, "the Jabez prayer is like a sort of 'spiritual quarter' that can be placed in the 'celestial vending machine.'"

But the obscurity of this one-sentence plea is best balanced by the whole of scriptural teaching on prayer, and Jesus' own model as recorded in the Lord's Prayer. Yes, we are told to ask; yes, we are told to expect and have faith. But no, we are not promised a life of abundant reward, except in the spiritual realm.

The normal Christian life is not, as Wilkinson would have us believe, marked by continuous miracles. The issue that makes many Christians react strongly (for or against) to a book like this is that it seeks to address a fundamental question: "What is the essence of a normal Christian life?" With each new theological fad we ask ourselves if we are missing out on some hidden Christian mystery that others have tapped into and that has escaped us.

There is only one thing that is *easy* when humans encounter the spiritual realm—the reception of God's free gift of salvation found in Jesus Christ. Advancements in our spiritual condition usually come with slow progress, and often, great anguish. Promises offering simple cookie-cutter steps to joyful Christian living are just the kind of things shallow-thinking twenty-first-century believers are prone to buy into—something concrete and manageable, something we can control and do in our spare time.

Christianity is hardly a "how-to" proposition, yet that does not stop many from reconfiguring it as such. Patented formulas and follow-the-recipe incantations guaran-

teed to deepen our Christian lives seem to titillate to the extent that current mystical talk-show host Jonathan Edward does—the widely admired spiritual medium who claims to receive messages from the dead. But the three-easy-steps-to-blessing Christianity actually lessens what God really wants from his followers—an increasingly reckless level of *pure faith*, a faith that the author to the Hebrews says may seem irrational and will certainly have no empirical evidence for believing, but is nevertheless a faith that may be certain because of God, and God alone.

Underneath the possibly ambiguous terms and seemingly grandiose claims is not heretical Bible teaching. Perhaps there is sloppy language. There are images presented that may seem out of place for those with button-down evangelical or fundamentalist upbringings. But then again, maybe we should launch a vigorous campaign pleading for atypical revelations from God. Perhaps our visions of service should be bolder and closer to the edge. This, after all, is at the very heart of the theological concept of faith.

A follow-up book by Wilkinson was released soon after *Jabez*, called *Secrets of the Vine: Breaking through to Abundance*. Two words stand out in this title—*secrets* and *abundance*. “Secrets” suggests that by reading this book the normal Christian will uncover a “deeper life” and facilitate an immediate quantum jump in one’s relationship with God. “Abundance” makes me think of the prevalence of “the health and wealth gospel” that mistakenly and tragically offers physical and financial reward merely because of one’s Christian status in this world.

No such promise is made in the Bible; only spiritual reward is promised. Any junk-food diet of results-oriented pabulum that masquerades in the name of Christianity reduces the abstract nature of the gospel to a manipulative, more palatable version. Now, to be fair to Wilkinson, I do not believe he is advocating a “prosperity gospel,”

but I can see how some could infer such from his phraseology.

Disappointment is another possible side effect for those who ask for increasingly bigger blessings and “enlarged borders,” especially if our lack of faith is seen as the cause. Disillusionment is bound to appear.

For those looking for insights into the Christian life and developing an ever-increasing faith in God, rather than the words of this little-known Old Testament Jabez, I would recommend the profound writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*The Cost of Discipleship, Letters from Prison*), A. W. Tozer (*The Knowledge of the Holy, The Pursuit of God*), and C. S. Lewis (*The Problem of Pain*).

I have been in Bruce Wilkinson’s home in suburban Atlanta and find him to be a genuine person of God, a man of deep prayer and firm biblical conviction. Wilkinson is the founder of Walk Thru the Bible, a very helpful means of familiarizing people with the main themes, key words, and most important people in the Old and New Testaments.

I hope this little book will do more good than harm. If it energizes some to pray more fervently for the advancement of God’s kingdom and their increasingly faithful role in it, then God bless it. If it unwittingly steers others down the precarious path of formulaic attempts at developing a deeper spirit-life, or worse, convinces some that God will automatically pour out bucketfuls of blessing if they only ask, then may God save us from ourselves. I am more optimistic about the former proposition than the latter.

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