

Reviews



ABRAHAM: TRIALS OF FAMILY AND FAITH, by Terence E. Fretheim. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007. Pp. xv + 262. \$44.95 (cloth).

Terence Fretheim has already written extensively on Genesis, and I was afraid there might be nothing very fresh in this volume. I need not have worried. There are a number of reasons why that is so. Genesis is a very rich text; only a fool could write a boring book about Genesis. Related to that is the fact that it keeps inspiring interpretation; one of the secrets to the stimulating nature of this volume is that it works in systematic dialogue with the writings of other interesting interpreters of Genesis. Another reason is that Professor Fretheim is himself an interpreter of insight who has interests that resonate with Genesis. He has clearly not lost his fascination with and his love for this part of Scripture, nor run out of the capacity to interact with it.

The book begins with a preface that is really more of an introduction. Prefaces conventionally tell their readers how the author came to write the book, apologize to their children for neglecting them while writing it, and express their appreciation to their students for drawing up its indices; one can usually skip prefaces. Here, that material comes in the acknowledgments, and the preface summarizes the “story line” of the Abraham narrative and then outlines how this book will work; so it is useful reading. The preface also warns (or promises) us that the book will pay little attention to source-critical and historical questions,

though one of the introductory chapters does survey these questions in brief, judicious fashion.

The main part of the volume begins by setting the Abraham story in its “universal frame of reference” in Gen 1–11. Professor Fretheim thereby gets onto ground he loves. The significance of creation is a theme he is very partial to; he has written a commentary on Genesis and his Exodus commentary also illustrates that, as does his “relational theology of creation,” *God and World in the Old Testament*. Bringing interests to Scripture can make us find things that are not there, but Professor Fretheim has no difficulty showing how essential is the relationship between Gen 1–11 and the Abraham story. God’s election of Abraham is not exclusive; it does not mean God is turning away from the world as a whole or that the writers of the Old Testament are fooling themselves into thinking that God is interested only in Israel. God’s election of Abraham is inclusive; Abraham is to form a bridgehead into the world, a means of bringing blessing to all the nations. Now there is actually nothing very distinctive about that point; others have emphasized it in recent years. Where originality shows itself is in the way Professor Fretheim spells out the universal implications of the Abraham story itself and its links with creation, in the Lot story, the Melchizedek story, and especially the way outsiders become a source of blessing and teaching to insiders.

A series of themes recur in the Abraham narrative as a whole, such as God’s calling and testing, Abraham’s endangering of Sarah, stories about the land, stories about

Lot and his family, covenant-making, and Hagar and Ishmael. These tend to come in pairs and have been reckoned to be arranged as a chiasm, but Professor Fretheim is not enamored of such theories and is wary of their capacity to obscure as well as illuminate. But he does let these themes structure his work, so that the chapters cover Abraham as recipient of promises (the covenants come here), Abraham and outsiders (in the endangering of Sarah and in the Lot stories), Hagar and Ishmael as outsiders, and Isaac and the “turning of the generations.” The final and longest chapter looks at what Abraham came to mean in the rest of the Old Testament, in later Jewish writings, in the New Testament, and in Islam. Throughout, the extensive endnotes (a curse on *endnotes*, though) carry on systematic, thoughtful debate with the extensive scholarly writings on Abraham; endnotes and bibliography occupy fifty pages.

Some quotable quotes: In Gen 12 and elsewhere, “the promises spoken by God

have creative capacity: they generate the power to respond positively to the command” (30). Genesis 12:3 suggests “the gift, threat, and challenge of the outsider” (33) and the stories of the endangering of Sarah illustrate how “people of faith have always had a somewhat mixed sense of how to relate to outsiders” (46). In Gen 19:27–28 (Sodom and Gomorrah) “Abraham retraces his steps and freezes at the horror of the sight....He has not a word to say, but his silence speaks volumes” (91). “It is striking, perhaps even disconcerting, that Hagar and Ishmael are given so much textual space,” almost as much as Isaac; yet they appear in no church lectionary (93). In response to Sarah’s laughing at God’s promise, God in effect says, “Do not deny the laughter, but continue to laugh and in time it will be transformed....Her laughter does not stand in the way of her becoming a mother” (115).

The dust jacket bears a reproduction of a wonderful painting of Abraham’s offering of Isaac by the Chinese artist He Qi. One

could hardly say that it is worth the price of the book, but this is my absolute all-time favorite book jacket, displacing that of George Steiner's *After Babel*.

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NAVIGATING PAUL: AN INTRODUCTION TO KEY THEOLOGICAL THOUGHTS, by Jouette M. Bassler. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007. Pp. 139. \$19.95 (paper).

Recent decades have witnessed the publication of an astounding amount of literature on Paul. It seems that few questions can be settled, and more than one interpretation has merit—even those that seem to be polar opposites. Further problems arise in light of recent criticism of “traditional” or “Lutheran” understandings brought about by the “New Perspective on Paul.” How does one move on without simply ignoring recent literature? And how do these issues raised by the “New Perspective” impinge on interpretations of Paul? In short, how does one deal with the complex beast now known as interpreting Paul and not be overcome with fear and discouragement?

Jouette Bassler, New Testament professor at Perkins School of Theology and seasoned Pauline scholar, offers a brief and helpful tool for “navigating Paul.” Bassler’s intent is indicated in the book’s subtitle—she aims to offer a treatment of Paul’s “key theological concepts.” In the preface, Bassler sets out the parameters of the book, stating, “this is not a book on Paul’s theology” (ix). Explanation: it is not that Bassler wants to present something other than a treatment of Paul’s theology; rather, Paul “practice(d) theology” rather than had a theology, if by “theology” one means a “reasonably well ordered and integrated set of beliefs” (ix).

Bassler offers treatment of seven “key concepts”—each one being discussed in a brief self-contained chapter (the longest

chapter, chapter five on the “Righteousness of God,” is twenty pages): “Grace,” “Paul and the Jewish Law,” “Faith,” “In Christ,” “The Righteousness of God,” “The Future of Israel,” and “Then Comes the End...” (resurrection and parousia). Bassler states that the book is “intended to orient the interested reader...to the significance of these concepts and the contours of the debates” (ix).

In addition to helpfully and clearly navigating these issues and showing a good grasp of the scholarly positions, Bassler recognizes and integrates into her discussions more recent hermeneutical perspectives: liberation theology (5) and feminist theology (15, 45–46). This is helpful, since often these issues are left out and their integration into Pauline interpretation unconsidered. Another merit of the book is Bassler’s frequent emphasis on the importance of and need for close, careful exegesis of Paul’s letters. This is a refrain that should not grow old even for the most seasoned scholar, and one finds it refreshing to encounter in this book. Furthermore, Bassler demonstrates this in her discussions in each chapter. A third merit is Bassler’s repeated push to acknowledge a dynamic in Paul’s articulation of these various concepts. Her statement about Paul’s view of the Law is emblematic: “these comments...are so varied, so rhetorically charged, and so situation dependent” (17).

While I think Bassler is right to point out the situational and dynamic character of Paul’s thought, one wonders if there is something more substantial that undergirds Paul’s thought on these key concepts. Her statement in the preface is actually a sort of theme statement for the book: Paul did not really have a “reasonably well ordered and integrated set of beliefs”; rather, Paul “thought through the problems afflicting his churches in light of the gospel” (ix). For example, Bassler states concerning Paul’s view of the Law in Galatians: “Paul’s response was dictated by his opponents’ insistence that Gentile believers were *required* to come under the Law, that is, to become Jews, in order to be full members of God’s

people” (21). I wonder if there is more. Could not Paul’s articulation of his view on the Law, even in a letter such as Galatians, arise out of a conviction external to the situation at hand? Unfortunately, Bassler does not attempt to articulate what this might be, or how the gospel functioned in Paul’s wrestling through these issues, other than that for Paul the gospel meant a mission to the Gentiles.

Bassler’s treatment of Paul’s “key theological concepts” is not exhaustive; rather, the concepts treated are related to issues raised by the “New Perspective on Paul.” One finds little treatment of other “key concepts.” For example, though references to Paul’s ethics are scattered throughout the book, no chapter discusses Paul’s ethical views, even when ethics seems to pervade Paul’s letters. The concept of the *ekklesia* is treated only indirectly in Bassler’s chapters on “In Christ” and “The Future of Israel.” Given the corporate emphasis of Paul’s letters (especially 1 Corinthians) and the use of the term *ekklesia* in each of them, one might think this should be a “key concept.” One also finds no chapter on Paul’s view of the cross/crucifixion, though references to it are also scattered throughout the book. There is no discussion of Paul’s christology and the question of Christ’s relation to God. More significantly, there is no treatment of Paul’s *theology*—his view of God. God figures prominently in the chapter on “The Righteousness of God,” yet Paul’s views of God are not discussed. This is a significant theological issue to be left untreated. It would be unfair to criticize Bassler for making necessary decisions such as selection of what “key concepts” to discuss. My comments here simply intend to point out that such decisions have been made in this book, and this book is more a treatment of selected issues related to and raised by the “New Perspective on Paul.”

Bassler’s book offers a fine treatment of Paul’s views on significant concepts, as well as an up-to-date discussion of scholarship and debates on these issues, in a non-intimidating way. It is a wonderful book for those without the time to wade through

James Dunn’s *Theology*, or Udo Schnelle’s *Paul*—ideal for pastors who want to keep up-to-date with scholarship and interested readers. However, I would caution against using it for a Bible study or general lay class because it lacks treatment of concepts some might find significant: God, christology, ethics, or Paul’s understanding of the church. Furthermore, the book assumes in the reader a certain level of understanding. The book does much to orient such an educated reader to the concepts Bassler discusses, and it also offers much to think on and raises questions for further study. For the purpose of helping “navigate Paul” in light of recent scholarship this book is a fine resource.

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ENGAGING THE BIBLE: CRITICAL READINGS FROM CONTEMPORARY WOMEN, edited by Choi Hee An and Katheryn Pfisterer Darr. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006. Pp. 150. \$19.00 (paper).

This collection of essays by five biblical scholars is based on presentations made at the Anna Howard Shaw Center at Boston University during the 2003–2004 academic year. Each presenter-author begins with an explanation of a specific critical hermeneutical approach to reading Scripture and then exemplifies that approach through work with one or more biblical texts.

Each of the five approaches lifts up voices and questions raised by different communities within a diverse society. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes explores African-American oral prophetic-apocalyptic traditions and then addresses these traditions with modern applications to the biblical passage about the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). Writing from a postcolonial perspective, Kwok Pui-lan raises questions that arise from those who have lived under colonial rule and the divided loyalties

that such experience encourages. Her study of Rahab (Joshua 2) is critical of those who don't acknowledge the treason that Rahab committed in coming to the aid of the Israelite spies. Aida Irizarry-Fernández suggests a communal reading method that arises out of her heritage in the Hispanic community. Focusing on Mark 14:3–9 and 2 Kings 2:1–14, she encourages a "See-Judge-Act" method that asks the readers to tell the story in one's own words, including imagined details; to question the biblical text based on shared experiences; and then to use the communal study of Scripture to guide the community's action in standing up against oppressive and unjust forces. In her critical feminist emancipative reading, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza questions the "kyriocentric," or domination-centered perspective of the Bible; encourages wo/men and members of other oppressed communities to read the Bible from the perspective of those in Scripture who are similarly disenfranchised; and offers a possible reading of First Peter from the perspective of freeborn and slave wo/men of the time. Finally, Carter Heyward presents her conviction that it is faithful and necessary to reject the authority of parts of Scripture that do not firmly advocate justice for all peoples. Using a "critical relational reading," she encourages the use of science, experience, and a stance for justice as tools for evaluating the authority of Scripture passages dealing with domination, anti-Semitism, and homosexuality.

The editors' intent is that the book be used to foster discussion within congregations about diverse biblical interpretive lenses, and the book, complete with study questions at the end of each chapter, largely meets this goal. A group of laity who have sufficient knowledge of the Bible, who are comfortable in bringing their experience and questions to Scripture, and who are open to a variety of Christian expressions would highly benefit from the reading and discussion of this book; although, it would also serve as a fine college or seminary text.

The essays are arranged so that the interpretive lenses become more radical as one moves through the book, allowing a group

to progress from a reading that assumes a basic authority of Scripture, to Heyward's essay that allows for an individual or group to discount the authority of certain Scripture passages. While each essay may be seen as an individual unit, the progressive structure of the book means that the critical hermeneutical approaches build one upon another, so that an individual or discussion group would have gained some insight into critical hermeneutics and discerning the nuance of an argument before arriving at the final essay, which if read first could be seen as too radical and dissuade a group from continuing the book.

The book contains essays from female biblical theologians, but need not be restricted to a feminine audience. The essays broaden their perspectives to include concerns and theological queries from other populations who have also been marginalized from society, from African-Americans to the poor to gay and lesbian people. The book would be best read and discussed within a diverse group of people. Since the goal of the book is to lift up various voices and questions that are not always present in discussion of Scripture, a similarly diverse discussion group would reflect the editors' intent and likely add a richness and realism to the hermeneutical perspectives presented in the book.

One concern with the use of the book within a congregation is the level of difficulty of some of the writing. Schüssler Fiorenza's chapter, in particular, is quite technical and could be difficult for one not accustomed to theological and rhetorical vocabulary.

The book, while an excellent introduction to the specific critical hermeneutical approaches discussed in the book, may not be the best introduction to critical reading of Scripture. While the scriptural reflection adds a touch of practicality to the book, its theoretical base would be more helpful for those who have already been exposed to some of the questions a critical reader of Scripture could ask of the text, perhaps by studying Scripture itself. This book, then,

could potentially be a further exploration into critical hermeneutical approaches.

Some congregational study groups would find portions of the book challenging enough that it might actually curtail discussion and close minds, but for the group ready for critical thinking and hermeneutical exploration, the book is a welcome resource.

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ALL THAT IS: A NATURALISTIC FAITH FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY,

by Arthur Peacocke and Philip Clayton.
Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007. Pp. 219.
\$22.00 (paper).

The base for this book is a fifty-five-page essay produced by Arthur Peacocke while he was dying from cancer (d., Oct. 21, 2006). There follow ten responses from persons prominent in the religion and science conversation. Remarkably, Peacocke managed fifteen pages of response to his respondents. With doctorates from Oxford in both science and divinity, Peacocke was for decades a leader in this conversation, joining such senior colleagues as John Polkinghorne and Ian Barbour. This work continues at a lively pace with major centers in Berkeley and Chicago and significant activity at other places, including the Twin Cities.

This conversation has great importance for theologians, including those who carry their theological work into pulpits and hospital rooms. For many people the sciences are seen as providing primary access to knowledge of at least “much that is,” though respondent Nancey Murphy appropriately claims (137) that science has failed to fill the “God space.” In any case a parish pastor with a faith in God the Creator has a stake in the territory where science seems to serve so authoritatively. We cannot afford to ask the ninth-grade confirmation student to make a choice between the messages he hears from his biology teacher and his pastor.

But is the way forward to follow a “naturalistic” faith? In his response, editor Philip Clayton locates Peacocke at the “milder end” of a continuum of naturalisms (166). The key category is divine action, and this naturalism rejects any divine “intervention,” but not “divine influence” in claiming that God does indeed act. Peacocke is questioned by his respondents here, with Keith Ward wondering if God’s particular actions are recognized and Christopher Knight finding a neo-Byzantine model serving better to account for God’s teleological action in relation to “the laws of nature.”

Before further word on where this volume leaves us with regard to divine agency, it should be noted that Peacocke places his view in the emerging consensus termed “panENtheism.” Peacocke joined Philip Clayton in editing *In Whom We Live, Move and Have Our Being* (Eerdmans, 2005). The eighteen authors in that book demonstrate the wide variety of views clustering together under the panentheistic rubric. They join Paul in Athens (Acts 17) in recognizing the closeness of divine presence. “All that is” is in God, and in that relationship God is present to (better, “in”) all that is. The role of relationship is absolutely central. God includes the world but is “more than” the world. Transcendence and immanence are not juxtaposed, for God is “transcendent IN relationship.” Other classic categories are similarly relocated, as Peacocke proceeds to write of Jesus the Christ and of the eucharist in naturalistic terms.

In some ways this “reach” may remind Lutheran readers of the prophetic cosmic christology of Joseph Sittler, as respondents Philip Hefner and Ann Pederson note. We find what I have called “God in the middle,” acting and suffering “in, with, and under the creative processes of the world” (25). This seems right to me, though some of the respondents find Peacocke’s God too much involved with things creaturely. Robert John Russell and William Drees, for example, opt for a more Boethian view of divine knowing, where God is lifted out of the temporal process.

How does this naturalistic approach get this “more than the world” God so emphatically *in* the world? The key notion is the scientific one of “emergence,” coded as the “E” in Peacocke’s EN(naturalistic) P(panentheism) vision. We are dealing here with “naturally occurring hierarchical, complex systems constituted of parts which themselves are, at the lowest level, made up of the basic units of the physical world” (14). Peacocke notes that Harold Morowitz has identified “some twenty-eight emergent levels in the natural world” (15). Getting to the point about divine action, we have come to understand “how higher levels can be a factor in what is happening at the lower levels.” Here we arrive at the familiar “top-down” causation theme, though Peacocke cautions that we perhaps should speak of “determinative influences” rather than of “causation.” Thus we move toward conceiving of God “as the circumambient Reality enclosing all existing entities, structures and processes and as operating in and through all, while being more than all” (22).

Theological readers will be highly interested also in the “later” themes of naturalistic incarnation and eucharist. They may choose to move somewhat differently than Peacocke, while embracing the basic point that second and third article themes are to be understood in terms of a creator God who in love is fully at work here in the middle. These more “advanced” formulations depend, as does the whole project, on Peacocke’s appropriation of “emergence” as applied to the God-world relationship. Thus in Jesus “a new emergent, a new reality, had appeared within created humanity” (37) and “what (if one dare so put it) ‘emerges’ in the Eucharistic event *in toto* can only be described in special non-reducible terms such as ‘Real Presence’” (43). Peacocke’s respondents offer significant comment on the question about whether emergence gets us to a God acting on (in) the world. Philip Hefner, while emphatic in his praise of Peacocke’s project, notes (67) that there is still widespread skepticism in science about this theme. Peacocke at times speaks of “whole-part” OR “top-down” cau-

sation. Robert John Russell as a scientist asks (150) whether the whole-part concept still works, if the universe is understood as having no boundary. Clayton wonders whether divine action is adequately illumined once we realize that wholes constrain parts only passively. He joins Russell in favoring “top-down” language (170), which Russell repositions via a quantum mechanical approach as “top-down through bottom-up” (150–151). Peacocke graciously grants (188) that perhaps he will have to swallow his aversion to involving quantum events as the locus of divine action.

Several times Peacocke in effect says “the conversation continues.” This brings to mind Ann Pederson’s question about whether the church is ready to know and practice “this kind of radical gospel” (129). I surely hope we are ready for the conversation. Meanwhile the church can wisely join others in bidding grateful farewell to this pioneer who called us into this conversation. As theologians of the congregation engage these challenging exchanges, they may pause gratefully to read again Arthur Peacocke’s “Nunc Dimittis,” in which he wrote:

This [final illness] is a new challenge to the integrity of my past thinking. I am only enabled to meet this challenge by my root conviction that God is Love as revealed supremely in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. However, the fact remains that death for me is imminent and of this I have no fear because of that belief....I know that God is waiting for me to be enfolded in love. (193)

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THE MAKING OF AMERICAN LIBERAL THEOLOGY: CRISIS, IRONY & POST-MODERNITY: 1950–2005, by Gary Dorrien. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006. Pp. 653. \$49.95 (paper).

Gary Dorrien’s culminating volume of his three-volume history, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, is an exhaustive

and magnificent piece of scholarship. In it, he traces the genealogies of the main movements in liberal theology over the past fifty-five years—personalist idealism, liberation theology, process theology, modern doubt and relativism, theologies of symbol and metaphor, and liberalism in the Catholic imagination.

Early in the volume, Dorrien offers a precise definition of liberal theology: “[It is] an attempt to create a progressive Christian alternative to established orthodoxies and a rising tide of rationalistic deism and atheism. Fundamentally, liberal theology is the idea of a Christian perspective based on reason and experience, not external authority” (2). In other words, liberal theologians have been about the task of trying to create a “third way” between what they consider to be orthodox positivism and secular doubt. Each movement develops this third way in its own unique manner, and this is what Dorrien has set himself the magisterial task of cataloging.

Before taking the time to examine the movements represented in this volume, it is worthwhile to state Dorrien’s secondary and provocative thesis. Basically, Dorrien believes that, although liberalism has been in a kind of crisis in this period (1950–2005), it has continued to be intellectually creative. He is bringing to light an “unnoticed renaissance” (513). One way he proves his thesis is simply by calling attention to the major theologians who have been a part of the renaissance: Langdon Gilkey, Gordon Kaufman, John Cobb, Sallie McFague, Ian Barbour, Elizabeth Johnson, Catherine Keller, Edward Farley, Peter C. Hodgson, and Philip Clayton, not to mention such best-selling authors as Peter Gomes, Harvey Cox, Martin Marty, John Shelby Spong, and Marcus Borg. These theologians, in the breadth, depth, and influence of their theology, compare favorably with the major liberal theologians of previous eras.

Furthermore, Dorrien himself offers a

proleptic culmination of liberal theology as he sees it flourishing as a public and spiritual force. Although I admit as a reviewer that I have been more shaped by the post-liberal and neo-orthodox (not to mention Lutheran) movements of our day, I do find the following vision for the future of liberal theology winning: “One might privilege the fluid, dynamic, and yet ultimate concept of spirit, and with that concept the categories of personality and love, interpreting experiences of the Holy as expressions of universal Spirit. God is creative and personal Spirit, motivated by love. In Jesus the Spirit of God dwelt fully. Love divine is the final meaning of Spirit. Evil is the lack and nihilating negation of the flourishing of life. Eternity is the life of divine love. Theology begins with the experience of the Holy, moves to the critique of idolatry, and presses to the prophetic demand for justice and the good... that is one way to advance interreligious thought and the critique of oppression from a Christian center” (539). This quote is a tour de force of careful reading and scholarship. It brings together in a precise and well-crafted manner the wide-ranging movements Dorrien has examined in the preceding chapters.

The most impressive characteristic of Gary Dorrien’s scholarship is its thoroughness. Sometimes you hear scholars described as erudite, followed by, “They seem to have read everything.” Dorrien takes “seems to have read everything” to a whole new level. In each chapter of his work, he makes reference to all the major works of the authors under examination—but he also references their public and private correspondence, and a host of other source texts. In this volume, you get biography and context as much as theological substance and thought. Even if you never read his books, I encourage you to simply page through his footnotes sometime. They are stunning.

Since the book is so very long (the three volumes, all together, are 1803 pages), it is only possible in this review to touch on some significant moments. First of all, Dorrien recognizes that process theology has

been key to the survival and renewal of liberal theology. Process theology has had a major influence on feminist theology, an influence Dorrien examines especially through the work of Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki. Process thought has also influenced much of contemporary ecotheology, especially through the work of John B. Cobb, Jr.

Liberal theology has also been influential in shaping the vision of liberation theology. He traces the origins of liberation theology back to the social-gospel movement by way of Niebuhr and Tillich. Dorrien, as always, weaves together biography and theology, in this case focusing on the work of James Luther Adams. Adams may not be the most familiar of figures, until one learns that it was Adams who almost single-handedly made Paul Tillich’s work available to an American readership. Tillich says that without Adams, “I would not be what I am, biographically as well as theologically....He knows more about my writings than I do myself; he made the first translations into English of articles I had written in German; he helped me get a publisher; and I have reasons to suspect that he did many more things for me than I have ever known” (138).

Dorrien packs his books with discoveries of this kind. For example, he examines the shaping influence of personalist thinking on Martin Luther King, Jr. King is widely recognized as a profoundly influential theologian and religious leader. What is less well known, but here illustrated by Dorrien to convincing effect, is how high a place King gave to belief in a personal God and the importance of personality in his theology, all a result of his seminary training that steeped him in personalist idealism.

Finally, given that atheism and doubt are on the ascendancy (or at least currently on the *New York Times* best seller list, most notably Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, and Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great*), it is worth taking up and reading Dorrien’s chapter on “Theology and Modern Doubt” (269–324). Taking a tour through the thought of Langdon Gilkey, Schubert Ogden, James Gustafson, and

Gordon Kaufman is bracing. As I read this chapter, I kept hoping that Dawkins and Hitchens could meet such figures (maybe especially Langdon Gilkey), and I kept remembering a senior seminar I took at Luther College where we read Gordon Kaufman’s magnum opus, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*. Professors and students in the seminar ran the theological spectrum from neo-orthodox, to liberal, to atheist, and it is a tribute to the creative liberalism of Kaufman (not to mention many other theologians represented in this volume) that the work thoroughly engaged all of us and brought us into constructive rather than divisive conversation. We can thank Gary Dorrien for bringing all these diverse movements in liberal theology similarly into creative conversation.

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MUSIC AND THEOLOGY, by Don Saliers.
Nashville: Abingdon, 2007. Pp. 83.
\$10.00 (paper).

Don Saliers, in his typically poetic way, writes here about the wonder, mystery, and potency of music in relation to theology. He organizes his thoughts in seven chapters, preceded by a “Prelude” and followed by a “Postlude.” In the “Prelude,” Saliers says he hopes to “show how music may be a key to the understanding of Christian theology” (vii), though it is not quite that simple. He also says he wants “to gain a deeper understanding of how music can be theological, and theology can be conceived as musical” (ix), then explains his concern like this: “How might theological discourse require music for its realization, and why do many forms of music evoke religious awareness that calls for theological interpretation?”

I’ll come back to this central matter. Detailing the topics of the seven chapters might help to lay out the terrain before that. The first chapter is called “Sound, Synaesthesia, and Spirituality.” It is about the na-

ture of sound, listening to it theologically, and, as “Synaesthesia” suggests in this context, the interrelation of the senses construed devotionally. “Music and the Body: Christian Ambivalence” follows. It concerns the tension Augustine isolates between the spirit and the sensual. The third chapter has to do with tasks of theology in relation to music. Here Saliers treats Martin Luther leading to J. S. Bach, Karl Barth, and Hans Küng, commenting from their respective Protestant and Roman Catholic perspectives on hearing doctrine sounded by Mozart. Singing theology in the poetry of hymns, songs, and spiritual songs comes next, with the idea that a good hymn is “theology in miniature” (x). Singing is also a political act. That’s the topic of the fifth chapter. In the sixth, Saliers seeks to get beyond the categories of the sacred and secular. The seventh chapter, called “Listening for the Music of Heaven and Earth,” deals with music and the holy. The “Postlude: Music as Theology, Theology as Music” recapitulates “the main theme and opens toward the reader’s improvisational elaboration” (xi).

This is a wide array of topics in a relatively few pages. What is it about? What holds it together? The book is probably best described as what the author himself calls “lyric theology” (26). Saliers delineates other types of theological discourse—systematic, historical, philosophical, pastoral, moral, and liturgical (25)—and then sets “lyrical theology” next to them. He cites the early church in which “the substance of theology was found in prayer and worship” (26), quotes Bishop Ignatii Brianchaninov who “was fond of saying, ‘If you pray truly...you *are* a theologian,’” then moves to Ephrem of Syria’s “Homiletical Rhythms on the Nativity” (26).

Glory to that Voice which became Body,
And to the Word of the High One which
became Flesh!
Hear Him also, O ears, and see Him, O eyes,
.....
Ye members and senses give praise unto
Him...

Mary bare the silent Babe, which in Him
were hidden all Tongues!

These examples, he says, make it clear “that not all theological discourse and modes of reasoning can simply be lumped together” (26).

Saliers notes music’s connection with time, with worship, and with associations (26–31). He realizes there is mystery here, in three senses: the mystery of sound as insubstantial and passing, the mystery that music lies so close to the way we have experienced a person or a place, and the mystery of music itself (29–30). This leads Saliers not to a systematic theology in the sense of a linear flow in which each point moves in logical fashion to the next point until a system begins to emerge. It is rather “lyric theology” in the sense of the way life is lived, like music itself, across time, where associations trigger other associations and go where they might. That should not be taken to mean that this is illogical, nor should it suggest that systematic or other types of theological discourse are called into question. It simply indicates that what Saliers is doing here cannot be equated with other ways of doing theology, all of which he regards as equally legitimate.

Actually, what Saliers is trying to get at is deeper than a form of theological discourse. The puzzle he is working on has to do with how music relates to sacraments or might be revelatory. Saliers is too good a theologian to call music a sacrament or to say it can make “truth claims,” though he alludes to its sacramentality (16) and knows the awe it can evoke (29). He is driven by its mystery to ask not only about music with words, which is a comparatively easy matter because words give obvious theological content. He also wants to know about music itself (29–30), when the words are absent or where there are no words at all. The puzzling reality of music, which reveals yet never reveals exactly what it reveals, drives him to try to express the inexpressible in the mode of “lyric theology.” The medium matches the message which, like music itself, never can be pinned down with too

much precision. That will delight some readers and give others fits. In either case, it will be clear that Saliers is working on hefty stuff that cannot be easily demarcated but is worth the effort he makes to examine it.

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**PREACHING THE STORY: HOW TO
COMMUNICATE GOD’S WORD
THROUGH NARRATIVE SERMONS,**

by Jeffrey W. Frymire. Anderson, IN:
Warner, 2006. Pp. 184. \$9.95 (paper).

This accessible book begins with what has now become a familiar lament in the preaching world. In the author’s words, “we are the last generation to experience preaching in its current form” (1). In order to support this claim, Pastor Jeffrey Frymire points to the emergence of technology and the rise of the information age as proof that the average North American preacher’s context has changed dramatically in recent years. In addition to our quickly changing world, Frymire claims that “music and worship have undergone similar changes” (4). The author offers a number of examples of these changes in worship before concluding that the only thing that has not changed in the last century is our fundamental approach to preaching. In fact, he laments that “we remain wedded to the ‘three points and a cloud of dust’ scenario for the preaching event” (6). In response to this ever-growing chasm between pulpit and world, Frymire points to the preaching ministry of Jesus as the model pastors should emulate. Specifically, the author contends that Jesus’ use of story as the means to engage his listeners is the preacher’s best way of speaking a meaningful word to his or her congregation.

Over the course of the next seven chapters, Frymire tries to help move preachers away from mostly ineffective deductive sermons towards a more effective and Christ-like narrative approach. The tools provided for this change include information about

why this change is necessary, exercises intended to help develop the skills needed for narrative preaching, and a number of examples meant to point the preacher in the proper direction.

In the second chapter, the author describes the first step to becoming a narrative preacher: to begin “preaching wholes instead of holes” (19). By this, Frymire means that preachers should concern themselves with preaching the whole of Scripture rather than specific Scripture passages disconnected from the rest of God’s revelation. In the author’s opinion, the Revised Common Lectionary or the most recent five-part series on generalities such as “finding purpose” should be replaced in favor of a sermon series on an entire book of the Bible. The chapter concludes with simple exercises such as retelling the biblical story aloud and basing one’s retelling of the story on sound study.

The third and fourth chapters offer readers helpful ways of approaching and retelling the biblical narratives. The reoccurring theme in each of these chapters is that in order to retell the story effectively, preachers must see themselves in the story. These chapters demonstrate how one could enter the story through the perspective of narrator as well as by voicing the antagonists and implied characters found in the biblical narratives.

Preachers will likely find the fifth chapter of Frymire’s book the most thought provoking. Encouraging preachers towards “renarrating” the text, Frymire urges preachers to explore the stories behind a given text. Noting many pastors’ reluctance to preach the Pastoral Epistles, Frymire offers some interesting ways into a text. Some of the ideas are helpful. For example, pretending to be a first-time visitor in a Corinthian church and describing what one sees seems to be a promising approach. Other ideas, such as the example of the preacher who wore a diaper to demonstrate the Corinthian church’s need for milk over Paul’s solid food, are thankfully beyond the comfort level of most preachers and congregations.

The next two chapters encourage preachers to focus the sermon on one point, as Jesus often did, and to rework the ratio of narrative and application in one’s sermons. Frymire claims that in propositional or deductive preaching, seventy-five percent of the sermon is application while only twenty-five percent is narrative. If a preacher simply reverses this ratio while maintaining the sermon’s central theme, the sermon will have a greater impact on the lives of its hearers.

Rather abruptly, he turns his attention to sanctuary layouts in his final chapter, where he laments the ways in which pulpits have become “a barrier between the preaching of the Word and God’s people” (138). The author even goes so far as to say that one “cannot do effective narrative preaching behind a pulpit” (143).

The strength of this book lies in its commitment to narrative preaching as a means for faithfully proclaiming the Good News in tandem with its accessibility to busy pastors reluctant to carve out time for study. Moreover, in an increasingly biblically-illiterate world, Frymire’s suggestion to use sermon series on whole books of the Bible is worth considering. Such a tactic may offer listeners the opportunity to learn the overarching narratives in Scripture in ways that the Revised Common Lectionary does not.

Unfortunately, the weaknesses in this book outweigh the strengths. First, the author’s points are often lost by his tendency towards hyperbole. Encouraging pastors to preach outside the confines of the pulpit is constructive, but calling the pulpit “a barrier between the preaching of the Word and God’s people” is not. The second and most obvious deficiency in this book is the author’s assumption that most preachers are lost in the dense dust of three-point deductive sermons and cannot find their way out. This was a much-needed critique thirty years ago when Fred Craddock offered it in *As One without Authority*. Today, however, I find very few mainline Protestant preachers who still rely on the deductive preaching style Frymire warns us against. Those who do would be better

served rereading Craddock's classic. The rest of us preachers looking for insight and rejuvenation can find them in greater abundance in other resources.

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AFTER THE BABY BOOMERS: HOW TWENTY- AND THIRTY-SOME-THINGS ARE SHAPING THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN RELIGION, by Robert Wuthnow. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. Pp. 312. \$29.95 (cloth).

Princeton University's Robert Wuthnow, the most distinguished sociologist of religion in America today, has presented a timely and important text for pastors and those who are concerned about the future of religious communities in America. In *After the Baby Boomers*, Wuthnow uses statistical survey research to make a compelling argument as to why and which young adults are dropping out of religious communities. The author shows that changes in family dynamics (e.g., the age of marriage and child-bearing) and the work environment are transforming the understanding of religion in those generations after the baby boomers. Wuthnow seems to place the media and its portrayal of young adult religious expression as his foil, asserting that in many ways young adults' thoughts and expressions of religious commitment (or lack thereof) are, contrary to the media's hype, similar to those of their baby boomer parents. What has changed for a great majority of young adults, compared to their parents, is family timing and vocational patterns.

Overall the project asserts that the church is losing young adults in religious communities. This loss statistically has been experienced the most by mainline congregations—though, contrary to perceptions, evangelicals too are losing young adults, just at a much lower rate than mainline religious groups. The statistics reveal that the main-

line decline is wrapped up in the more dramatic loss of young adults than anything else. The author's most constructive proposal for congregations is to stop giving so much attention to high school groups and younger in the church, and to turn attention and resources to young adults. He worries that young adults are particularly vulnerable, not only because they have left religious communities, but because most societal institutions that once helped young people make the transition to husband/wife/mother/father are now in the rearview mirror of young adults' lives before they have to make such decisions. Therefore, Wuthnow contends that religious communities could serve a vital societal need by being places of welcome and support to unmarried, childless young adults.

Chapter one sets out some of the larger themes of forthcoming chapters. Here the author takes the reader deeply into statistical examination to show that marriage and having children is happening later in life, due to changes in economic structures as well as the lengthening of life expectancy. In chapter two, Wuthnow asserts that religion is not a self-contained reality but must always be seen as part of the larger culture. To understand young adult spirituality, he examines seven societal trends that have an impact upon them: (1) the delay in marriage, (2) late childbearing, (3) uncertainties in work, (4) changes in higher education, (5) loosening of relationships, (6) globalization, and (7) the information explosion. Wuthnow begins unpacking these realities in chapter three by looking directly at the reasons for the decline in young adult participation in congregations. Because religion is a conventional sociological reality (i.e., it is something mainstream people do, people with careers and children) and because young adults are living unconventionally much longer, they therefore are not returning to congregations as they once did. Thus, as he states in chapter four, we see a significant decline in people in their twenties in all religious groups. While the media have portrayed young adults as much more syncretistic in their religious beliefs, Wuth-

now discovered that beliefs have not changed all that much since the baby boom. There seems to be proof that young adults tinker more with faith traditions, but overall there has not been a major drop in orthodox commitments. The largest statistical drop, though, has occurred in mainline Protestantism.

Chapter six examines church shopping and church hopping. Wuthnow explains that church shopping is looking for a church with the right resources and opportunities for an individual or family; church hopping is participation (often peripherally) in multiple religious communities. Not surprisingly, church hopping is more common among young adults. Chapters seven, eight, and nine discuss the impact religious communities and young adult involvement or lack thereof have on societal marriage, liberal/conservative politics, and racial diversity. No book on young adults would be complete without a discussion of electronic media. Chapter ten addresses how young adults use the internet and what that might mean for religion.

The book ends with the most engaging

chapter. Here Wuthnow stops spinning statistical models and begins interpreting the phenomena that he sees. Returning to major points laid out in the first chapter (the need for the church to focus on young adults rather than just high school students and the need for the church to provide young adults an institution of support), Wuthnow more fully explores what is at stake and what might be done.

In the end, *After the Baby Boomers* offers pastors and church leaders an important text to ponder. Wuthnow places his finger on many issues that the church must confront. However, the reader may find many of the chapters flat, as the renowned sociologist continues to discuss numbers and their cross-relationships. Yet, this should not keep one from examining at least the first two chapters and the last. Here the reader will be presented with an issue that the church should not ignore.

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