

Reviews



A MASTER OF SURPRISE, by Donald H. Juel. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994. Pp.144.

The “master of surprise” is Mark—Mark, the book, and Mark, its author. In Juel’s approach the two are congruent. The author is known through a literary analysis of the book, and it is in the search for this implied author that the literary character of the book is discerned. The character of the book lies in a series of interrelated surprises intended to engage the reader with the unexpected presence of God in the person and work of Jesus.

The gospel of Mark has been a primary focus for Donald Juel across the length of his career as student, scholar, author, and teacher. This little book of nine chapters is the distillation of that productive engagement. One does not need to read very far to be aware of being instructed by one who is himself a master of the material. Here long reflection and reasoned reconsideration joined to reverent persistence with the material result in a guide to the interpretation of Mark that is clear, cogent, and convincing.

The volume is a companion and sequel to Juel’s commentary on Mark published in the Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament Series in 1990. The chapters belong to that special genre of interpretive writing made possible by intense and sustained involvement with the whole of a literary work. They deal with the material in broad, integrative, and concluding ways not possible in the format of a commentary. They present the kinds of insights and overviews that come with writing a commentary, but in certain ways outrun the comment. Using the two together and observing their interplay would provide a uniquely stimulating resource for the interpretation of Mark.

The book is about the interpretation of Mark, about questions of method and approach, only in a secondary sense. The first two chapters lay out Juel’s positions and commitments. The various criticisms (source, form, redaction, social) here proved inadequate and inconclusive because they attempt to understand the material in forms other than the one form that is tangibly available to the interpreter, the book itself as a literary composition. The most promising of current approaches is rhetorical criticism, the analysis of a writing as a work composed to persuade, broadened so as to include the whole interpretive enterprise. That means that Juel does not advocate a doctrinaire absolutism of method resulting in reductionism and circularity. For him rhetorical analysis is eclectic, open to the insights and corrections of other methods. Proper historical concerns are not to be abandoned and the gospel, as it were, reduced to mere fiction; rather historical questions are shifted to a different point in the process of interpretation, to furnish corrective constraints on improbable reading and resources for assessment of the truthfulness of the narrative. He is concerned especially that method should not function as a defense against reckoning with the reality of the ultimate subject of the book, the presence and claims of God.

The book is, however, primarily an interpretation of Mark. There are chapters on the baptism of Jesus (1:9-11), the parable instruction (4:1-34), the exorcism of the legion of demons (5:1-20) and related material, Jesus’ final discourse (13:1-37), the passion narrative (14-15), and the famous conclusion that concludes nothing (16:1-8). These, of course, are pivotal passages in the Markan story where an interpretive boring finds literary strata that underlie the whole. Juel’s interpretation of each opens vistas on the

entire book. Read through, the sequence of chapters provides an accumulating grasp of Mark's story of Jesus and funds an ability to read all its parts with deepened insight.

Juel's treatment of Jesus' baptism illustrates his eclectic employment of rhetorical analysis and the influence of his theological commitment. Drawing on the Greek text, he corrects current translations to show that when he had been baptized, Jesus "saw the heavens being torn apart"; the distance between heaven and earth, between human and divine, was bridged in the event. Juel shows how the event and the confirming words spoken over Jesus from heaven assume readers who know these words come from Israel's scriptures. The immediate literary context is used to learn that Jesus identified as the expected one appears in the unexpected setting of a baptism of repentance. The image of the torn heavens is set in connection with the torn curtain of the temple (15:38) separating the holy and profane; the two form an interpretive *inclusio* around the story. From the complex of discernments, motifs that pervade the whole book are illumined. The entire narrative is about the intrusion of God into a world that has become alien territory. Jesus is the presence of that intrusion. Through him boundaries are breached and expectations remolded by the unexpected. The baptismal story provides the motive power that informs and drives the entire story. All of the chapters are equally rich in integrative discernments.

Juel concludes that Mark implies and engages readers whose faith is domesticated and who have come to terms with their world and their life in it. Their problem is indifference and a weary lack of perception about the truth of the way things are. Such a conclusion reads Mark as a gospel for church in these times. The reviewer accepted the assignment of Juel's book because he expected that he would be helped better to read Mark. He is not disappointed.

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THE BARMEN DECLARATION AS A PARADIGM FOR A THEOLOGY OF THE AMERICAN CHURCH, by Robert T. Osborn. Toronto Studies in Theology Volume 63. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1991. Pp. 250.

Robert T. Osborn, long time professor of theology and religion at Duke University, has written what will probably stand as his finest (but we hope not his final) book. *The Barmen Declaration as a Paradigm for a Theology of the American Church* applies the confessional insights of the Barmen Declaration to the American theological context. In recent years the Barmen Declaration has obtained confessional status and scholarly attention in a number of ecclesial contexts. Osborn's text represents the most serious and comprehensive effort to make use of the theological vision provided by Barmen. Osborn's project builds upon the historical significance of the Barmen Declaration for understanding German Christian resistance to the state in its manipulation of the church. Here the Barmen Declaration evokes the possibilities of theological critique of the American ecclesial situation. The fundamental thesis of the book is that the Barmen Declaration offers guidance in forming a theological vision for authentic ecclesial existence in America.

Two very insightful motifs emerge at the very beginning of the text. The first motif suggests that struggle is inherent to the very being of the church. The struggle of which he speaks is the struggle of the church to be itself, that is, to live in a fashion consistent with its own self-understanding. *The church does not have a struggle, the church is a struggle*. This anatomical consciousness of the church's nature illumines a second motif. Given the existence of the church in the chaotic currents of modernity and post-modernity, the Barmen Declaration is uniquely positioned to speak a confessional word to churches trapped in the problematics of modernity and post-modernity. Barmen shapes a paradigmatically modern critique of the church while calling forth analogies in the present situation of the American church to the situation of the German church.

Osborn's skillful outlining of this situation exposes the theological dynamics in-

volved in the German *Kirchenkampf*, the struggle to be the church. Fundamental to this struggle was the ideological function of natural theology. Natural theology, as a powerful social and political rhetoric, helped to solidify a fragile German self-confidence after "the post-war depths and despair of the twenties." This quasi-political rhetoric helped to capture the official German church in an uneven and unholy exchange in which they received into their being the "divine" word of the Nazi state alongside the word of Christ, while in return the word of Christ coming from the church could not be injected into the political realm. Thus the Barmen Declaration sought to clarify the relation of the church to the state in such a way as to reclaim the church's identity over against the state. This is crucially a theological clarification which by analogy would also encompass American theological reflection upon the nature of the church.

The first chapter posits the question whether or not Jesus Christ is actually the one and only Lord of the church, whether or not his word is the one word and only word the church has to hear in life and death (35). Here Osborn recognizes the social and political ramifications involved in the various epistemic starting positions in American theological discourse. His review of these modalities of knowing illuminates the theological problems implied by each. Beginning with this first chapter we find a unique awareness of the hermeneutical significance of the Jewishness of Jesus for theological reflection, especially for reflection upon the authentic nature of the church. Osborn critiques the inability of German theologians during this period to grasp the significance of Jesus' Jewishness. This inability even affected the framers of the Barmen Declaration, yet Osborn notes that the theological trajectory implied by this confession not only makes room for the significance of Jesus' Jewishness but clearly places at the center of the Barmen Declaration's purpose the utter importance of this history for making Christian existence intelligible.

Chapters two and three take up the question of the church's identity in relation to the state and the entire civil community.

With great theological insight, Osborn takes up the difficult issue of recognizing the form of the church's witness to society while recognizing the church's formation in society. This difficult issue presents a twofold problematic: First, how does the church acknowledge the total claim of Christ upon the whole world while overcoming the manipulation and policing of that claim by the state and the larger civil community? The Barmen declaration helps us to re-emphasize the claim of Jesus to the totality of society for the kingdom of God. As the church we participate in this claim as we acknowledge Jesus as both priest and king. The second problem involved in recognizing the church's witness to society is establishing *who* will determine the church's public order and expression toward society. Barmen recognizes the power of prevailing ideologies to determine the "external" form of the church's life in the world, that is, the *way* the church should embody its word and make its witness. In the American situation these ideologies are shaped by the subjective individualism that defines personal identity.

Chapter five presents a unique approach to the question of the concrete modalities through which the church interacts with and speaks to the political structures that govern the larger community in which it finds itself. In the American situation, he notes two temptations facing the church in the formation of these modalities. The church is either blinded by a vision of the resolute secularism of the American political realm or it is blinded by the desire to bring religion back to America's now religionless center. Over against these two temptations, Osborn suggests that Barmen's fifth thesis points to the only authentic modality of the church which is to be the church of Jesus Christ, and him alone, and as such a church in and for the world. Thus the church is, as a light in and to the world, both spiritual and political.

The final chapter, in a sense, turns the whole task of contextualizing the nature of the church on its head. The project of the book has been to parallel the contexts in which the Barmen declaration had been and may continue to be not only intelligible but fruitfully used by the church in forming

its identity. Yet this comparison of contexts actually reinterprets the way we understand contexts in such a way that the church is freed in its particular locations to understand itself in the service of all people, especially the poor and oppressed. Thus the final thesis of the Barmen declaration, for Osborn, solidifies Barmen's call for an orthodoxy that is a function of orthopraxis. The church stands doctrinally and concretely in the various places that it finds itself.

Quite concretely, a church that does not stand with and for Christ, above all among the powerless and marginalized in their struggle for liberation, will find itself instead at home in the centers of power and itself subject to this power. (219)

This book makes an interesting contribution both to theological reflection on the Barmen declaration and to theological reflection upon the American theological situation. What also commends this book is the theological rigor with which it goes about its task.

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THE MAKING OF THE CREEDS, by Frances M. Young. London:SCM, 1991. Pp. 115.

As I write this review, music is playing in the background, at least imaginatively. It's the theme song from the popular TV series of a couple of decades ago, *Mission Impossible*. Can you hear it?...Good. You see, Frances Young was asked by SCM Press to write a book that would replace Alan Richardson's twentieth-century mini-classic, *Creeds in the Making*—a breath-taking assignment indeed! Richardson's volume was first published in 1935, has undergone fifteen impressions, and has been read by thousands upon thousands of seminarians, pastors, and lay people. It reached its stature because it authoritatively introduced Christian doctrine against the background

of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds and it did so with surpassing clarity. Since Richardson's time, however, new discoveries like the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Library have led to more richly textured portraits of the first centuries of the common era. These new portraits provide the opportunity to reconsider the monumental achievement which the creeds represent as they brought—and bring!—into focus the fundamental identity of the Christian confession of who God is. Young takes the complexity of those first centuries into consideration. She also approaches her task more aware than Richardson of the narrative and interpretive nature of history and of its telling.

These days there is much talk among leaders of Christian communities about new emerging missional paradigms for Christians in North America. It's a conversation that I applaud. One motif running through these discussions is the tension between our identity as Christians and our missional engagement with North American cultures. While certainly much is new in our times and places, we can thank God, nevertheless, that our era is not the first to struggle with this tension between identity and engagement, normativity and relevance. It was fully present as the classic ecumenical creeds and confessions came to be. In the midst of our own paradigm shifts we have the opportunity to "taste them again for the very first time"—as the Kellogg's Corn Flakes commercial puts it.

The classic era cultivated a lush crop of missional wisdom, still ripe and ready for harvesting. At the root of creedal wisdom lies the insight that the question of Christian identity is ultimately a question regarding the identity and disposition of God. In *The Making of the Creeds* Christian leaders will rediscover this most basic question of the Christian heritage. In this way Young's book lends a helping hand to contemporary harvesters for bringing in the sheaves.

In six chapters Young addresses four issues. First, she explores what it is about Christianity that leads it toward a concern for right belief and teaching. Why does Christianity develop a creedal concern? She briefly covers the familiar terrain regarding the baptismal, catechetical, and doxological

contexts for early creedal formulations. Christianity's creedal concern arises for a second reason: the various and disparate choices for construing the basic identity of Jesus of Nazareth, chief among them being docetism. Rightly, Young makes a compelling case that the creedal concern for truth remains "indispensable" for human wholeness.

Young's second subject is God as triune. Here she has three chapters which explore from an historical perspective the theological claims of each article of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. In her chapter on "One God, Creator of Heaven and Earth" she admirably sets out key characteristics of Greco-Roman popular world views with an emphasis on gnosticism. Gnosticism forced early church theologians to focus: Is this world God's or not? The development of the teaching of *creatio ex nihilo* signifies, first, the powerful reliability of God, even in the face of martyrdom, and, second, the essential contingency of creatures and creation. Her next chapter, "One God and One Lord Jesus Christ," touches upon all the essential points but is not as well arranged as it might be. The final chapter in the trilogy on God deals with "The Holy Spirit and the Holy Catholic Church" and is adequately done. She has informative sections explaining the three persons and the one divine essence, the Donatist controversy regarding the nature of the church, and a "note" on the *filioque* addition.

Young's next to last chapter tackles the christological questions regarding Christ's humanity and divinity. She clearly sets out the theological issues and options leading up to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. Here she seeks to persuade readers that "Chalcedon is more than paradox and more than mere parameters. It points in positive directions while standing against the mistaken notion that the problem is like chemistry" (79).

Her final chapter, "For Us and for Our Salvation," explores "the doctrine of salvation," as she calls it. Here she clarifies and deepens an insight which has been present throughout her chapters, namely, "the controversies which produced the doctrines which reached formal definition [explicated in her earlier chapters] were often

fired by concern that the gospel of salvation be safeguarded" (80). The primary concern of this chapter is with the soteriological approaches of the theologians of the first three centuries, although she does briefly relate these approaches to the great atonement models associated with the names of Anselm and Abelard. A little further elaboration at this point would have benefited readers without unduly stressing the book's length or intended scope.

There is much in this book that is worthwhile, even though it lacks the bright clarity that Alan Richardson's book has. Allow me yet a final word, one of substantive criticism. As mentioned earlier, Young's chapter on the first article of the creeds is titled "One God, Creator of Heaven and Earth." This title departs, of course, from creedal discourse which always interrupts the apposition of God and Creator with "Father." I say "interrupts" because creedal discourse does this purposefully, that is, with surpassing theological purpose. Now Frances Young does not say why her chapter is so titled, though I expect there is an implicit desire to alleviate in whatever ways possible the devastating effects of masculine gender ascriptions to the triune God. I share this desire (!) and still I find the apposition of "God, Creator" to be a fateful (literally!) apposition which creedal discourse decidedly intends to interrupt and to do so precisely with the christologically dependent "Father." Furthermore, I find no evidence in *The Making of the Creeds* that Young is in tune with what is at stake in the creedal interruption.

For instance, while discussing the great Cappadocian theologians, she states that they understood "that God's essence was incomprehensible, but his existence and his attributes could be known through his works...in his creation" (31). Such theological reasoning would warrant the apposition "God, Creator," thereby rendering the creedal interruption, "Father," unnecessary, a position which the Cappadocians would not advocate. Perhaps Young realizes this and that is why her full statement reads: "...but his existence and his attributes could be known through his works. The Creator was partially revealed in his creation." Of course, it is precisely the par-

tialness that is problematic and, indeed, fateful! The Cappadocians were themselves indebted to Athanasius, and it was he who decisively put his finger on what is at stake in the creedal interruption, as I have come to call it.

In his *Orations against the Arians*, Book 1, paragraphs 33-34, for instance, Athanasius argues that when the primary apposition for God is Creator, then implicitly, if not also explicitly, human relationality with God is ultimately mediated through the Creator's creation. Athanasius notes that this is precisely the apposition which lies at the heart of Greek theology and religion and why the eschatology of Greek religion always culminates in Fate. Athanasius notes that on the basis of the apposition of "God, Creator" it will forever remain a tossup whether people will come to "praise and honor" God for what God has made. Against the "God, Creator" apposition Athanasius argues that, because "Father" is "indicated and determined only by the Son," those whose ultimate relationship with God is mediated precisely through the Son by virtue of the Holy Spirit do come to an ever-ready praise and honor of God who creates everything. It would be my thesis that without the creedal interruption every new mission paradigm will remain mission impossible. On the other hand, with such a christological interruption already at the heart of the Christian creed's first article, mission is possible, indeed, mission is promised. Praise and honor!

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GOD THE SPIRIT, by Michael Welker.
Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994. Pp. 360.

WINDS OF THE SPIRIT, by Peter C. Hodgson. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994. Pp. 421.

This reviewer, one more time, has returned to Africa where, among other things to do, I continue writing a book on the Holy Spirit. But this year I first set for myself the task of reading these two books

for a review in *Word & World*. Africa, as my "social location" for four months each year, evokes a most enthusiastic response to Hodgson's observation:

Our problem is that we sophisticated Westerners really cannot believe in such a thing as the Holy Spirit, cannot believe that a Paraclete is at work in the world, or that the world will attain its consummation in God. Perhaps then it is not surprising that it is among the powerless, oppressed, and marginalized that the Spirit is pouring itself out afresh—upon those for whom authentically liberating power can come only from God, not from humanity. The Spirit is arising for us today from the underside of history. (282)

Most would also agree with Michael Welker, professor of systematic theology at Heidelberg, that "the secular common sense of the West has great difficulty in gaining even a distant perception of anything approaching God's Spirit." Even so, great numbers of people living in the west have embraced, first, the classical Pentecostal movement which erupted at the beginning of the 20th century, second, the charismatic movement which surprised many of us in the early '60s, third, Neo-Pentecostalism's fundamentalist opposition to the charismatic renewal and, finally, the so-called Third Wavers of the 1980s. Together these constitute the largest religious movement of our time. A theology of the Holy Spirit in this world-wide context must be constructed in the "charged field" between two poles: the secular consciousness of God's distance still dominant in large areas of the world such as Welker's modern Germany, and the testimony of millions who experience God's nearness.

At the same time, a theology of the Holy Spirit must take into account how deeply liberation and feminist theologies "have begun to infuse all forms of theological thought and feeling." These theologies have not always assigned to the Holy Spirit the very power which liberates the oppressed and restores the marginalized to full human participation. Welker recognizes that feminist and liberationist theologians have good reason to fear being co-opted by liberal or conservative theologies of the Holy Spirit. He sets out to write

a "realistic theology" that will not try to reduce all differences to an underlying sameness. A realistic theology must be sensitive to differences. "Unity of the Spirit" must take ever new forms in a postmodern age. The Spirit is one but the "action of God's Spirit is pluralistic for the sake of God's righteousness."

Societies today no longer have a center but are organized and perceived, in Welker's term, "polycentrally" – that is, there are many types of public spheres, making it all the more difficult for broad, international, cross-cultural response to real global dangers. At the same time the dominant sensibility in the West is so narcissistic that the only remaining point of reference or stability is "inner feeling." It is against this postmodern background that Welker will develop his realistic theology of the Holy Spirit. But only after he exposes what he calls the threefold "Babylonian captivity of theology and piety," does he begin to propose his "realistic" theological alternative to each form of bondage.

The first captivity is the illusion that there are "totalizing conceptions" into which God and God's power can be made to fit. The biblical narratives make it clear that no one human setting in life, no culture or human experience, "is in control of God as *such*." The second captivity is the widely held preference for the "I-Thou" or dialogical personalism as the absolute paradigm for God's way of relating to the world. Welker proposes that dialogistic theology be "relativized and broadened, or replaced by more appropriate forms." The third captivity is to "social moralism," primarily the idea of progress. The reality of God's Spirit must not be confused with even the most far-reaching moral markets. "A realistic theology sees...that moral markets collapse into self-righteousness" and become powerless to save humankind from self-endangerment.

Having cleared the ground for his proposed "realistic" theology of the Holy Spirit, Welker does a surprising thing for a systematic theologian. The next four chapters (there are a total of six in all) are devoted to Welker's very close reading of scripture concerning the Spirit of God.

Welker is true to his method: he reads the Bible without succumbing to any of the three captivities. The result is an unfailingly interesting, rich, diverse narrative. He lets the Bible speak and thus question most of the assumptions that the modern reader has concerning the Spirit of God, assumptions that belie the captivity of the westernized mind to totalizing concepts of God, world, reality, and selfhood; to subject-object notions of knowledge; and to what constitutes a moral sphere or "market." He actually pays attention to how, in the Bible, the Spirit of God is experienced even at the earliest strata of the tradition. "Even these early experiences point to the fact that the Spirit is not something numinous, but a power that changes real life situations." This power of the Spirit has many characteristics which cannot be reduced to a totalizing conceptuality. Welker's reading of scripture advances too many fine insights to be recounted here, but one of the notes which is sounded again and again is that the Spirit of God for all of the biblical traditions (plural!) is not a "pure" Spirit which is unmixed with creaturely stuff like flesh. "In order to effect life, the action of the Spirit needs that which is fleshly."

Only in the final and sixth chapter does Welker the systematic theologian turn from biblical motifs to make his own proposal for a realistic theology of the Holy Spirit. His radical suggestion is that Christians make a total and clean break from the two-thousand-year habit of thinking about the Spirit in Aristotelian categories. The way we think about the Spirit is killing us as surely as if we were addicted to a dangerous drug. He offers a brief, brilliant but dense analysis of Aristotle's understanding of Spirit, then shows how it is taken up and modified by Hegel, and ingested by virtually every theologian of the west since Augustine. He indicts Barth as well as Jüngel.

To put all this in succinct and misleadingly simple terms: In Scripture, the Spirit of God, unsurpassably manifest in the crucified Christ, is self-withdrawing and selflessly self-giving for the sake of benefiting others. But in the tradition of western theology following Aristotle, the Spirit of God is rendered as pure actuality, self-

possessed and self-absorbed. Welker not only details how that doctrine of the Spirit has corrupted the western mind and endangered the whole world so dominated by western powers, but finishes the book by showing how the Spirit of God as found in scripture offers a salvific alternative.

My advice to prospective readers is to engage Welker, before Hodgson, for his close reading of the biblical perspectives on the Spirit. Then turn to Hodgson for his proposal for understanding the Holy Spirit. It is a powerfully argued and relevant construal that is true to his "commitment to a theology of critical engagement that is 'revisionist' in character. 'Revisionist' means here the necessity of 'revising' all the central claims of Christian faith in light of the critical questions raised by the modern and especially now the postmodern world." Hodgson believes strongly in these central Christian claims but he is concerned to release them from all forms of thought and practice which might hinder their "potential for redemptive transformation" in the world endangered by oppression, ecological disaster, and destructive conflict among religions.

Hodgson's revisionist theology is not far from Welker's realistic theology, insofar as both are proposing new forms of thought about the Spirit which will be closer to the testimony of scripture and tradition. As we have already noted about Welker's work, it is the way we have been taught to think as Westerners that has kept us from a genuine engagement with revelation as witnessed to in scripture. For Hodgson, "revelation is a relation, not a truth, doctrine, deposit or supernatural disclosure." Hodgson sets out to revise the whole of the Christian dogmatic tradition with just that understanding of revelation. Like Welker he draws on Hegel, but is much more expansive and appreciative than is Welker of the possibilities in Hegel for revising theology.

Hodgson's work is the culmination of his more than thirty years of teaching systematic theology, which he goes to considerable length to re-name constructive theology. This book grows out of the course in which he teaches theology so understood. He claims that he has tried to

make the book "accessible to beginning students of theology." While he has completely failed to do that except for the most gifted and motivated "beginning students," he has wonderfully succeeded in meeting most other criteria for a serious, original and—for specialists—highly readable and even demanding theological study. I predict that this one-volume "Constructive Christian Theology" will become a widely used and much debated textbook in university divinity schools such as Vanderbilt, where he teaches, and in liberal seminaries. Most beginning students will need help in catching on to the significance and relevance of what Hodgson is proposing. I will make use of it at my own non-liberal confessional seminary because, for the most part, I agree with his assessment of the context for theology today and I appreciate how he uses the manifold resources he brings to bear on the task of constructing theology for the Christian witness in our postmodern time.

For all of Welker's and Hodgson's talk about the Spirit as a power that changes people's lives, or about the Spirit as the presence of God empowering solidarity and creative transformation in the world, the final impression left with this reviewer is that the intended audience for these books is theoreticians and not, well, practitioners of faith. Especially Hodgson's mastery of the material and his constructive proposals are as brilliantly nuanced as we have come to expect from either of these thinkers. And while Hodgson provides us with a candid and courageous "personal epilogue" which allows the reader to catch something of his own social location, I was left wondering, "Do either of these theologians ever preach or lead congregations in prayer, as did Barth and Tillich? Have they ever struggled with a congregation for any length of time beyond a brief consultative visit, trying month after month to construct sermons, prayers, and liturgies that would be faithful to the tradition and relevant to the complexities of a hurting community?" Perhaps they have, and if so it really would not and should not change the excellent content of what they have written. Even so, I wonder how one can write of the pervasive, indwelling power of the Spirit with so

little evidence of passion. I mean the passion I have felt in those whom Hodgson often quotes: Elizabeth Johnson, Mark K. Taylor, Sallie McFague, Langdon Gilkey, Mary Potter Engel and – yes – Jürgen Moltmann. Maybe my years among Christians in Africa and my decade of the '60s as a campus pastor at Cornell University have made me too marginal as a theologian, and thus in the wrong "social location" for writing such splendid books as these by tenured university theologians who would presume to speak for the truly marginalized of the world.

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NARRATIVES OF A VULNERABLE GOD: CHRIST, THEOLOGY, AND SCRIPTURE, by William C. Placher. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994. Pp. 188.

"God is one who loves in freedom, and in that free love God is vulnerable, willing to risk suffering" (xv). Placher, professor of philosophy and religion at Wabash College in Indiana, sketches out this idea in contrast to views centering on power, views held by "most people, in cultures where Christianity has been a dominant influence" (xiii). He calls this effort "programmatic" rather than a full christological statement. But the direction of his thought is evident and in sketching the implications down this road he ventures boldly into a wide range of controverted issues.

Placher draws many voices into conversation with him. His historical studies have been praised for their competence and accessibility and in 1989 he located himself in the contemporary theological scene with *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* by a discerning response to the likes of Habermas, Rawls, Foucault and Rorty. With *Narratives*, Placher shows himself once again to be an author who reads widely and appropriates wisely. On the same page he can draw support from Karl Barth and Carter Heyward

(16). Robert Jenson is here, but so are Elizabeth Johnson, Cornel West, and Emmanuel Levinas. Placher is a Presbyterian and on many matters he offers a view of John Calvin that will be very attractive to Christians in the central reformation tradition. Thus, regarding the Lord's supper, he writes: "what matters to Calvin at minimum, over against Zwingli at his worst, is that Christ's presence in the sacrament is real and something that God does, not merely something we create by remembering something God once did" (147).

Yet, in insisting that Christ's last moment on the cross was "not a moment of miraculous or extraordinary strength" he can write candidly: "Calvin, I fear, got this one wrong" (25).

Taking up his theme, Placher argues that "in coming vulnerably into creation God is not giving up the characteristics of divinity, but most fully manifesting them" (15). Drawing heavily from Mark's gospel, he shows how the "strange power" of God's suffering love is at odds with the assumptions about power that ruled the culture in which the gospel was written and that rule our culture as well. With that sentence the other key word in the title comes into play: "Narratives." Placher is a product of the Yale school and the influence of Hans Frei (*The Identity of Jesus Christ*) is especially apparent. He takes from Frei the theme that "for christology...the doctrine is not the meaning of the story but rather the story is the meaning of the doctrine" (15).

The gospel narratives are themselves vulnerable. In a particularly engaging chapter entitled "Gospels' Ends" Placher distances himself from members of the Yale school who would claim that there is a single story with unity and coherence. Looking at the endings of the gospels, Placher's reading of these "complex and ambiguous narratives in which no one story overpowers all the others" (89) opines: "You need not deconstruct these texts. They fall apart in your hands" (91). But they also resist certain kinds of literalism and connect with the readers in such a way as to draw them into a relationship with the one about whom the authors write. Thus the church becomes a gathered community with "a framework of shared sto-

ries and understandings of those stories within which we can live our lives together as Christians" (139).

In a third section of the book, following the treatment of the vulnerability of God (I) and the vulnerability of the narratives (II), Placher takes up the theme of discipleship and in a closing chapter writes of "Risking Vulnerability: Christian Faith in Academy and Society." He challenges the academy's alleged value of "objectivity," even though he has earlier claimed against the deconstructionists that in principle historical evidence can refute faith (93). He positions himself between the "generacists" and the "tribalists." In critiquing the former, "whose policy positions involve nothing distinctively Christian" (172), he suggests that Robert Bellah's proposals represent "a still utilitarian view of religion in service of the national good," despite Bellah's important critique of the individualism of a therapeutic culture. In

comparison, Stanley Hauerwas' emphasis on the church being the church "makes good sense" (175), but may in tribalist fashion inadequately address the roles Christians play other than as church members.

In all of this Placher does not offer a full-blown position, but a programmatic direction is evident. Once again as in the 1989 book, he is trying to identify that even in our pluralistic culture "there are legitimate ways to stand for something" (177). He pleads for the Christian to "keep rejecting the advantages that Christianity's residual cultural status could provide" (178), to speak as Martin Luther King did from the margins and the underside. And always there will be the note of irony which may discomfort our allies just at the moment of victory by asking awkward questions.

William Placher has amply demonstrated that he is an author to watch...indeed, to read. I find the direction of this

present book very promising and eagerly await the fuller christological statement. In that book I hope he will address some of the questions raised by this work in such intriguing fashion. I will mention only two examples. The second chapter, "The Eternal God," speaks of God in Christ being differently related to what we call time than we are:

Subjectively (that is, in his human experience of time), Jesus experiences his life as a whole, in which past, present, and future are not at war with one another but cohere. Objectively (that is, as known by God), Jesus' life is anticipated before it comes and treasured after its completion. (37)

On the second point, Placher appropriates Barth to write, "we cannot say of Jesus that He was 'not yet' in this time before His time, just as we cannot say of the time after His earthly life, the time of the apostles and the community, that He is 'no longer'" (38). But does the "before" here threaten to put in doubt the very decisiveness of the coming of the eternal logos "in the flesh" of Jesus? The question Placher is responding to in this chapter has to do with whether the Christian can have confidence that the free God will love forever. Surely he is right to seek an affirmative answer to that question. While I may have misread him (and so lack the enviable fairness and care with which he treats the many authors whom he

cites), I am not convinced by the combination of Boethius and Barth he summons.

A still more neuralgic point, existentially, may be his significant treatment of "The Savior and the Vulnerable" in chapter five. He voices well the concerns raised particularly by feminist authors concerning a savior who is *male*, *suffering*, and *unique*. There is not sufficient space in this short review even to summarize Placher's helpful contributions, especially on the first two questions. (Some hints, though: he stresses how Jesus the Jew subverts the binary oppositions by which we so regularly proceed and he insists Christianity understands suffering neither as a good in itself [though it must be risked and may be expected] nor as passive acceptance.) In the third issue, uniqueness, I am unclear how the observation that disagreement signals difference, not that somebody is wrong (122, drawing on Audre Lorde), combines with the remark that "on fundamental matters they are wrong" but "may well be serving God's providential purposes in pursuing the depths of their own faiths" (125).

We may well hope for more from William Placher, whose insightful analysis and constructive sketch of a direction already serve Christian readers with admirable directness.

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