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# Book Reviews

## THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY HYMN IN ENGLAND

Donald Davie

Cambridge: CUP 1993 167pp £27.95 hb ISBN 0 521 38168 1

Donald Davie is a poet himself, a critic of rare sensibility and comes of staunch Yorkshire Methodist stock. He is therefore eminently fitted for the task he set himself in this study, all the more so for those of us who were first stimulated by what he had to say about eighteenth century poetry in his initial major work, *Purity of Diction in English Verse*, now over 40 years ago.

In this volume he considers Byrom, Watts, Wesley, Smart, Newton and Cowper; and here too, as he tell us in his introduction, 'poetic diction' is still what he is 'principally concerned with'. He is illuminating on aspects so various as comparative translation of the psalms (Watts/Smart), the 'rococo' qualities of the latter and the 'carnality' of Charles Wesley.

But Davie is no mere philologist. His commentary is set within an encyclopaedic knowledge of hymnody, literature more generally and the sensibility of the period. His references and quotations from other writers, not least from minor figures in letters and the like, serve to widen the compass of his survey and to confirm the sagacity of his comments. Besides this, there is his wise and understanding perception of the character of his subjects, illustrated, for instance, in the contrasting responses to Calvinism noted in Newton and Cowper and his recognition of the latter's 'twisted sensibility' and, beyond that, the fact that though that 'twist gives to some of his hymns an incomparable power, some of that power may be pathological'. In this is perhaps yet another of the oxymorons that Davie finds so often. More particularly, he notices this phenomenon in 'Amazing grace', emphasising that the occasion of such oxymorons here is itself, the greatest of them all—the Crucifixion of the Redeemer'.

Davie ends aptly—and contrastingly—with Blake as 'a portent' of what was to come, and adding that in the assaults on traditional duties and beliefs 'the faithful have looked in vain for guidance—certainly from the Church of England, which in the present century has consecrated more than one bishop who would not subscribe to either the virgin birth or the resurrection'. Donald Davie does well to remind us of such stalwarts of the faith as Watts and Wesley and Toplady, Newton and Cowper, by whom the pure doctrine is versified for our edification and, yes, our enjoyment.

ARTHUR POLLARD

Churchman

**PREACHING IN THE LAST DAYS—The Theme of the Two Witnesses in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries**

**Rodney L Petersen**

Oxford: OUP 1993 318pp £37.50

ISBN 0 19 507374 6

Apart from the Song of Songs, no book of the Bible has suffered so many different types of interpretation as has the Apocalypse. From the earliest days of the Church, this book has been read either as prophecy or as allegory, and been related to the political and social developments which concerned the different interpreters. In this book, Dr Petersen concentrates on the theme of the Two Witnesses (Rev 11:3-13), and shows how this was understood from the fourth to the seventeenth century.

He traces a line of development from Victorinus of Pettau (d 304) and Tyconius through Bede and Joachim of Fiore to the Hussites, and finally to Bullinger and the Reformed Churches. He shows how the circumstances of the Reformation were particularly suited to an all-but-realised eschatology. The persecution of the Protestants by the Catholics (and of the Protestant radicals by their more moderate brethren), as well as the wars of religion and the general breakdown of traditional society, created an atmosphere in which apocalyptic visions found a special niche. Many, if not most, contemporary commentators believed that they were living in the Last Days, and that the End was at hand.

This belief made it particularly important to identify the signs of the times, among which the Two Witnesses occupied a prominent place. Who were they, and how was their death and resurrection to be understood? Most Protestants naturally identified them with persecuted people or groups, and asserted that their testimony could not be suppressed by the Powers of Darkness represented by the Papacy or by the Protestant establishment. But there were other voices as well, including some who saw the restoration of Charles II and of the Church of England (1660) as the true fulfilment of this prophecy! Particularly interesting, especially in the light of subsequent history, is the fact that many Puritans saw the Apocalypse in a positive light, as a call to build the New Jerusalem in joyful expectation of the Lord's imminent return. There was a utopian side to the whole affair which played a great part in establishing the self-understanding of New England, in particular.

Today we can look back at all this and smile at the naiveté of those who were convinced that such interpretations were self-evident. In our own far more apocalyptic age, it seems almost comical that anyone could have identified the Pope or the King of England as the Beast. But of course, these things are all relative, and what seems strange to us was perfectly natural to sane and godly men in the seventeenth century. It is a reminder

to us of the relativity of so much of our own vision, but also of the power which apocalyptic imagery can exercise on the mind of the Church. It may be a mistake to tie this imagery to specific historical events, but as long as we are being reminded that there is a divine plan in human history which is being worked out in the persecutions and wars which Christians have to endure for their faith, there is something of value and importance in what these Reformation commentators were saying.

If this book demonstrates anything, it is the need for a proper historical filter, which can separate the dross from the gold and retain the latter for our continuing edification as believers. Fortunately, the author is well aware of this, and in his concluding remarks makes this point. This is a book for specialists in Reformation history and in biblical interpretation, but it can be read with profit by anyone reasonably familiar with the issues involved. For those concerned with modern millenarian movements, it provides a necessary perspective and a healthy corrective to some of the wilder ideas which still float around in popular literature today!

GERALD BRAY

### **SEXUAL CHAOS** Tim Stafford

Leicester:IVP revd edn 1993 173pp £6.99

ISBN 0 85110 991 8

In this timely book the author, who is a senior writer in the magazine *Christianity Today*, has revised his former one *The Sexual Christian* first published I believe in 1989. It is not in any sense a tirade against the sexual chaos of today, all too apparent wherever one looks; rather it is a careful analysis of the sexual mores of our present Western society (with a reference particularly to the USA) and a discussion of the stages which historically have given rise to them. 'People who grew up before World War II often misunderstand our current sexual situation' he writes. They think they see 'rampant immorality'. What is a truer characterisation of what we now see is rather *chaotic* lives; people don't know what they are supposed to do. Fifty years ago the guidelines on how to live sexually were clear, even if disregarded. Today they are not. It is no wonder that the younger generations are confused.

How has this arisen, and where does it manifest itself most conspicuously? Has it any connection with the repressive emphasis of bygone ages, with the discovery of methods of easy birth control, with feminism, and so on? The author discusses these questions with understanding and insight. I appreciated the way he traces the historic rise of the new outlook on sex relations and marriage from the time when the 'Old Consensus' was everywhere the norm—incest, adultery and divorce

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were wrong; lifelong monogamous marriage was right—through the Playboy experiment, to the current quest for ‘intimacy’ as the criterion of ethical propriety. It is the story of the loss of a sense of God the Creator, and the quest for something to take His place. Sex is an element very fundamental to human life, and one quite inescapable to most men and women. Moreover, it has a sense of mystery about it. Why not make it that something?

The author ranges widely over his subject. he has something to say about every relevant manifestation: sex outside marriage, the ethics of desire, homosexuality, celibacy, and much else. This is a book for thinking people: ministers, young unmarrieds, stressed marrieds, and—unmarrieds! I wish it a wide circulation.

DOUGLAS SPANNER

## THE WRITINGS OF JOHN CALVIN—An Introductory Guide W de Greef

Leicester: IVP Apollos 1993 254pp £14.99pb

ISBN 0 85111 435 0

This excellent introduction to the life and works of John Calvin is a must for every serious student of the Reformer. It reads rather like an extended encyclopaedia article, covering all the main points concisely and lucidly. In the case of Calvin, who is little known apart from his *Institutes* and his *Commentaries*, this feature of the book is particularly important, because it sets the man and his achievement in context.

The book’s overall plan is neat and easy to follow. After a biographical chapter to set the scene, we are introduced to Calvin’s early writings, and then to his major works on Scripture. From there, the author takes us through Calvin’s writings on the Church, including controversies with Roman Catholics and radical Protestants, bringing us finally to his efforts at ecumenical reconciliation. Only then do we find a chapter devoted to the different editions of the *Institutes*. The whole book is rounded off with a chapter on Calvin’s miscellaneous writings and another on his correspondence, which was both voluminous and important for the history of the Reformation.

As one would expect, there is a full list of Calvin’s own writings, and where they may be found, both in the original languages and in English translation. There is also a reasonable bibliography of secondary literature, and a chronological list of Calvin’s writings at the very end of the book.

Dr de Greef has set out to provide students with a handy and accurate introduction to Calvin, and in this he has succeeded magnificently. The book will obviously have to be supplemented from time to time, as new editions of Calvin appear, but the fundamental structure will hardly be improved upon. Highly recommended!

GERALD BRAY

**LETTERS ALONG THE WAY—A Novel of the Christian Life**  
**D A Carson and John D Woodbridge**

Nottingham: Crossway Books 1993 283pp £5.99

ISBN 1 85684 075 1

This book, only a novel by courtesy, is one of the most enjoyable and profitable books I have read for a long time. Dr Paul Woodson who died of cancer in 1991, was Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois where the two present authors hold chairs (New Testament, Church History). He was married but to his great sorrow had no children of his own. A close friend of his, however, had a son Timothy, and the young man had the supremely good fortune to find in Dr Woodson a father indeed when his own father suddenly succumbed to a heart attack. This story consists of a series of letters which passed between them. It started almost accidentally in the spring of 1978, at the end of a frantic junior year at Princeton which included a broken love affair, and terminated after he had become a Christian, started an affluent financial career in new York, married, felt the call to the ministry and taken over a challenging pastorate in Orlando. The letters end in December 1991. Each of the long replies by Dr Woodson is prefaced by a brief rehearsal of how he, Timothy, had reacted to the previous letter (not always entirely favourably), and a statement of the new problems and difficulties on which he wanted an answer. In these he is very frank; but the real value of the book lies in the extraordinarily wise, penetrating, loving and self-effacing replies Dr Woodson sends back. There can be few professors who would take such pains as he did, especially when Timothy vacates Trinity after his first year to acquire more 'academic respectability' by attending Yale (he returns, however, for his third year a wiser man). The topics dealt with are very wide: moral lapses, liberalism, the difference between American and British evangelicalism, the way the latter is developing, the gospel in France, theological pluralism in the context of a new love affair, the almost complete liberal ignorance of current conservative scholarship, Plantinga's apologetic strategy, pastoral problems, dryness in ministry, the importance of prayer, building a personal library, the present debate over the meaning of 'justification', and many more. The spirit of the writer is wholly admirable, his breadth of knowledge remarkable, and

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his patience almost limitless. I could wish this book were in the hands of every ordinand in training, and in those of many settled ministers too. I would have treasured it myself. It is a mine of wisdom in both practical and theoretical matters; and it breathes a spirit of warm devotion to Christ and the gospel. Get it and give it away as freely as you can.

It is well-produced and at a very reasonable price.

DOUGLAS SPANNER

**SCIENCE AND CHRISTIAN BELIEF—Theological reflections of a bottom-up thinker John Polkinghorne**

London: SPCK 1994 211pp £9.99pb

ISBN 0 281 04714 6

John Polkinghorne FRS is well known as the eminent Cambridge mathematical physicist who left science to enter the Anglican ministry and has since written five delightfully readable, scientifically authoritative and certainly very influential books on the subject of science and religion. This is his most important book to date, the cover states. It consists of the Gifford Lectures for 1993–4, and unlike some of his predecessors he sets out ‘to make much more detailed contact with the core of Christian belief’. Accordingly, he groups what he wishes to say around successive assertions of the Nicene creed. He is broadly orthodox in his theology; for instance, he accepts the Empty Tomb but (if I have understood him aright) is a little quizzical about the Virgin Birth. He does not believe Jesus ‘went around thinking of himself as God’ (a sentiment perhaps better left unsaid); nor does he believe that our Lord’s recorded predictions of his death in Jerusalem are to be accepted at their face value (for to do so would be to deny his perfect humanity). He is thus rather cautious, though on the whole positive, about our Lord’s deity; statements about it must be ‘carefully nuanced’ however. One consequence is that his theology of the Atonement is surprisingly weak; the most positive statement I can remember is that the Cross showed that God ‘is truly a “fellow-sufferer”, knowing the bitterness of the human condition from the inside’, ‘opening His arms to embrace the bitterness of the strange world He has made’. It seems to have little to do with human sin and the righteousness of God—logically enough, for suffering, not sin, appears to be ‘the most agonizing of all theological problems’.

His Christology is thus left somewhat open to conjecture. Yet he regards Jesus Christ as unique (‘the unique incarnation of God’; marked out by the resurrection as ‘historically unique’). This makes him unsympathetic to multi-faith services. ‘Either Jesus is God’s Lord and Christ or he is not, and it matters supremely to know which is the right judgement’, he says. What price then the New Testament? But I will return to that point later.

An impression that deepened as I read this book was that it could well be proposed as a good example of the employment of that cardinal principle of theological liberalism; *the key to successful advance in theology is to follow the scientific method* (perhaps this is what he meant when he referred to himself as a 'bottom-up' thinker?). Now the scientific method is, in the broadest sense, *the rational examination of evidence*. Of course, it is much more than this, but this is foundational. But what sort of evidence? The answer is important: *public evidence, evidence which is in principle accessible at will to man as man* (Michael Foster). No matter where the evidence comes from, this criterion is inviolable; and clearly it is what accounts for the promise of ultimate universal acceptability for scientific understanding. The liberal theologian accordingly starts with the presupposition that this is the right way forward, and I suspect, never really questions it. In the case of the present author it is in keeping with this that (like James Barr) he regards the Bible fundamentally not as Revelation (in the time-honoured sense) but as 'evidence'—as reliable evidence maybe, but only of *what the great prophets and thinkers of Israel or the early church believed and taught*. Polkinghorne writes, 'revelatory action does not take the form of a mysterious conveyance of incontestable propositional knowledge; rather, it is mediated through events and people which have the character of a particular transparency to the divine presence and to intimations of a lasting hope'. How he feels himself in a position to assert this is not stated, nor how we are to identify the people who have this 'particular transparency' or to interpret the historical events alleged to possess it. When John writes 'God is love' are we to judge him 'particularly transparent' or just an incurable optimist? When he writes 'the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin' is he being a little more opaque, perhaps, to the 'divine presence'? What sort of authority are we to allow to John 1:14, or to the fourth gospel as a whole? For Polkinghorne writes of 'aspects of the gospel picture which are uncongenial to the modern reader', especially where Jesus is reported as using 'scathing, or even vituperative' language of his opponents. He may be cautious about discarding these, but the impression remains that he is open to doing so if his theology comes to require it. Everything is threatened with relativization under the liberal programme.

My reaction to this whole liberal approach is that it is faulted in its basic presupposition, the validity of subjecting theology to the scientific method (unless indeed, the basic 'given' is taken as the book of Scripture rather than the book of Nature, as earlier generations have expressed it). True, God has revealed himself through Nature to sight and hearing, as well as through spiritual experience to the heart. There is thus a sort of analogy between the two spheres, and in the first the scientific method has proved supreme. But that does not justify us in presupposing that the way forward to understanding must be the same in the second. To suppose that it is the liberals' great mistake, I believe, and it is firmly negated in the Bible (Matt 11:25f; 16:17; 1 Cor 1:21ff). The two spheres are too essentially different;



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one embraces the relationship of I-It, the other of I-Thou. In the first, human pride often seems to succeed, in the second it never does; rather 'He takes the wise in their own craftiness'. Isaiah asserts with telling irony 'Yet he also is wise', and this justifies us in believing that in the two spheres God's methods of instruction may be widely diverse. For humanity had no need of Quantum Theory or even of the simpler principles of electricity and magnetism in the days of the patriarchs or apostles; but long before the scientific method had even been dreamt of it had a need as urgent as now of knowing for sure God's character as Creator and Redeemer, as merciful and gracious. This applied moreover to the simple minded no less than to the intellectually gifted. These considerations surely supply reasons for our Lord's exultant praise, 'Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Thy sight'.

If one were to ask the author why he is a Christian, on the basis of what he has written here I imagine he would reply somewhat as follows. 'I have had a spiritual experience which has profoundly changed my way of seeing things. In seeking to understand it I feel the Christian creed makes the best sense of it all, and I am confirmed in this by the fact that many thinking people seem to have travelled the same road and come to the same conclusion. Moreover this creed throws light on other things as well—the Anthropic Principle, for instance, and the strange fact of the comprehensibility (and in mathematical terms too) of this whole universe.' I hope I have not misunderstood him, but if I am right he thus gives faith's confession the status of no more than a good theory (p130). As such, it is always subject to correction; and it has lost its close contact with God, and any satisfying transcendence. I am reminded of Ian Ramsey's words in his book *Models for Divine Activity* (1973):

As everyone knows, theology is at present in turmoil; and if I were asked to characterise our present discontents I think I would select two features as basic—First, there is the loss of a sense of God's presence; and secondly, there is a growing inability to see the point of theological discourse. We have become . . . insensitive to God; and theology . . . has died on us.

One of the most significant faculties given to humankind is that of speech and language. In respect of this man differs in immense degree from the lower animals. It enables him not only to communicate with great versatility and clarity but even beyond that to engage in conceptual thought. Theology itself would be impossible without it! It furnishes some of the most telling metaphors for the activity of God himself. But in denying propositional revelation Polkinghorne is almost asserting that the Giver of this supremely powerful gift has omitted to use it himself. I cannot feel that

this is in any sense a satisfactory position, not least because it runs counter to the convictions of a people who have a 'particular transparency to the divine presence', and whose basic creed—the *shema* (Deut 6:4ff) – itself begins with a foundational item of propositional revelation.

I do not want to give the impression that I gained nothing from this stimulating book. I found it well worth the effort of reading, and I shall probably read it again. But I could wish it interacted more with Scripture as genuine *revelation*, and not merely as 'people groping for concepts capable of doing justice to their experience'. There are an increasing number of conservative scholars of the first rank, like D A Carson, Paul Helm or the late D M MacKay, but the author shows little familiarity with their work. I am grateful for his insistence that Jesus Christ is 'the unique incarnation of God', in spite of the difficulty this faces us with in view of our shrinking and turbulent world and the pressures of rival and militant world faiths. But 'in the end it is . . . truth that matters' he well says. However, I find his stand here (like his denial of propositional revelation) quite incoherent theologically with his attitude to the New Testament, virtually the sole source of our knowledge of this unique Person and his work. If it was indeed God who sent him uniquely 'for us men and for our salvation' and whose mighty power was exercised to raise him uniquely from the dead, why has God not given to men and women who desperately need to know this a more trustworthy and lucid record than the liberal allows the New Testament to be? Why has our race had to wait for the advent of modern critical scholarship before everything becomes clear and free from error? Our theology seems indeed to have 'lost the sense of the presence of' the only wise 'God', as Ian Ramsey said; and I for one have no doubt that many intelligent but ordinary men and women would confess 'an inability to see any point in its discourse'. Yet 'the common people heard him gladly'. The present dominance of theological liberalism is a sad state of affairs.

I have one last comment to make on the author's basic position: the primacy of experience (and the scientific method). In one sense one must agree with him: experience hits us first. But we are established in our believing on one of two grounds: experience or authority. 'Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else accept the evidence of the deeds themselves', our Lord said (John 14:11 REB: cf 10:38, 20:29). And that seems to mean that ultimately faith has to come 'top-down', not 'bottom-up'.

There is a Glossary of five pages explaining scientific and theological terms and with notes about personages; a Bibliography of six pages; and a general Index of four.

DOUGLAS SPANNER

**THE ONE, THE THREE AND THE MANY—God, Creation  
and the Culture of Modernity. The 1992 Bampton Lectures**

**Colin E Gunton**

Cambridge: CUP 1993 248pp £9.95pb ISBN 0 521 42184 5  
£30.000 hb ISBN 0 521 42030 X

Colin Gunton is Professor of Christian Doctrine at King's College, London and in this book, based on his Bampton lectures, he has tried to dig deep into the origins of modernity and discover why they have led to such an unsatisfactory state of affairs as we have at present. He has some very important things to say. Unfortunately his style is hardly 'reader friendly', and the result is that only real enthusiasts for philosophical theology will be able to muster the resolution to give it the serious attention it deserves. This is a pity, for the subject is of wide importance.

Professor Gunton traces the trouble back to antiquity which he thinks is remarkably like modernity in important respects. For instance, both share a difficulty in giving due weight to *particularity* (one thinks of Plato's problem of universals); both find it hard to overcome fragmentation in connection with the realms of truth, beauty and goodness, as a result of which 'the modern is deeply uneasy in the world'. Modernity has displaced God from the transcendent to the immanent sphere, so losing the element of genuine 'Otherness'. With this has gone the all-important emphasis on *relationality*, and understanding of which can be recovered only by a full-blooded return to a trinitarian doctrine of creation. For the Being of God is actually constituted by the perichoresis of the Three Persons. This is the foundational 'Otherness-in-relation' which establishes the importance of both the one and the many and resolves the tension which is so apparent in modernity—between different economic and political systems (socialism and capitalism, totalitarianism and democracy), different systems of ethics and aesthetics, or different cultures (scientific and artistic).

The author believes Irenaeus got the doctrine of creation right, by giving it a Christological and Pneumatological basis; Christ and the Holy Spirit are the 'two hands' of the Father in his creative work. Augustine got it wrong and set the church on a false scent in using an analogy for the Trinity based on the individual rather than on his (and her!) sociality. Gunton is also much indebted to Coleridge for his notion of 'ideas' (concepts applicable to persons), two of the principal of which are 'sociality' and 'spirit'. (His 'transcendentals', like 'relationality', 'perichoresis' and 'substantiality' are applicable to all things). His conclusion is thus that plurality is written into the very nature of things, because of the *hypostatic union* constituting the Holy Trinity. Theology's way forward lies in this direction, not in such immanentist theologies as those of Lampe and the process theologians. Professor Gunton, like Coleridge, does not see an absolute distinction

between revelation and reason; I would judge from this that his attitude to Scripture is that it should not be taken as inerrant.

This is an important book; I could wish it were written in a more lucid style. There is a Bibliography of nine pages and a general Index of seven.

DOUGLAS SPANNER

## **NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY SURVEY:**

**Fourth Edition D A Carson**

Leicester: IVP; Grand Rapids: Baker 1993 96pp £4.99pb

ISBN 0 85110 985 3

This invaluable little book will find a valued place on the shelves of all those who regularly read and/or buy commentaries—which presumably includes many readers of Churchman. In brief compass Carson gives potted reviews and comments on commentaries and other books on all NT books. He is clear-cut, brief and, in his own words, ‘I prefer to be a shade too trenchant than a good deal too bland’. Thus, although writers of commentaries might blush, buyers and readers are given clear guidance as to where, in Carson’s well-tuned opinion, the quality lies.

After an introductory chapter on commentary series there is a chapter on NT Introductions (‘pride of place must go to the mammoth work by Donald Guthrie’) and Theologies. The bulk of the book contains very full lists of commentaries on each book (with publisher, price and ‘in print’ status): scholarly and popular, old standards and past disappointments - with incisive comments. The following extracts suggest the style (names omitted to protect the authors!): ‘so odd I am uncertain why it was published’ . . . ‘packs a great deal of astute comment into relatively small compass’ . . . ‘worth skimming’ . . . ‘it may provide interesting suggestions to the unsophisticated Sunday school teacher’ . . . ‘important for the really serious student’ . . . ‘more influenced by Barth than by Paul’ . . . ‘will guide you stolidly with the heavy tread of the proverbial village policeman (although with more theology)’ . . . ‘occasionally wrong-headed’ . . . ‘so kind to Paul’s opponents that he makes Paul sound like a twit’. Clearly one could dissent occasionally from Carson’s assessments but as a resource this is unmatched. Readers should especially note the list of ‘best buys’ which closes the book, with which it would be hard to disagree - unless you are happy making-do with the works of Calvin and the sermons of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

PETER M. HEAD

Churchman

**1-3 John IVP NT Commentary Series**

**Marianne Meyer Thompson**

Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP 1992 168pp £8.95 hb

ISBN 0 85111 671 X

**James IVP NT Commentary Series George M Stulac**

Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP 1993 208pp £9.99 pb

ISBN 0 85111 673 6

**Galatians IVP NT Commentary Series G Walter Hansen**

Leicester and Downers Grove: 1994 180pp £9.99 hb

ISBN 0 85111 675 2

One thing that has often been lacking amidst the never-ending flow of new commentaries that fill our shelves is clear guidance on applying the message of Scripture to life and churches today. Evangelicals, for some strange reason, are worse than anyone on this; the NIGTC, for example, explicitly gainsays any 'attempt to apply and expound the text for modern readers' (editors' forward), and most of the works in the Word Biblical Commentaries, the New International Commentaries, and even the Tyndale series offer little explicit reflection on relevant and appropriate application. Having thus given us a generation of commentaries with a major lacuna (and training scholars to treat Scripture as what it really is not cf 1 Thess 2:13) we now find publishers queuing up to add yet more series of commentaries to the fairly saturated market ('market' is the key word in all of this of course: if modern Evangelicalism has a slogan it must be 'marketing is next to godliness'). Zondervan has announced a new series of application-centred commentaries, but IVP has got in first with its IVP New Testament Commentary Series (general editor Grant R Osborne). This series aims to fill (if not to plug) the gap in the market: 'a series to and from the church, that seeks to move from the text to its contemporary relevance and application'. In terms of academic level and readability they are closer to the Tyndale commentaries than the Bible Speaks Today series.

The three volumes under review are therefore of great interest in terms of their approach to application of the message. While all these three are written by Americans, the first is by a professional New Testament scholar, the second is by a pastor and the third by a New Testament scholar teaching in Singapore. We shall take them in chronological order.

Dr Thompson teaches at Fuller Theological Seminary and is known for her previous work on John's Gospel. In this commentary she has produced a useful and helpful commentary, making good use of notes to discuss disputed points (with reference to the major commentaries), and focusing on expounding the text. The situation of the churches in relation to those who have left (2:19 etc) is clearly related to the exegesis. Thompson further emphasises the soteriological dimension of the divergence, and thus sees

1 John's teaching on the atonement as central to the concerns of the epistle. John's somewhat absolute teachings are closely related to the difficulties brought about by the secessionists. Thompson's very proper concern to situate the material in the life of the early church tends to limit the options in terms of application and she is often quite thin here except for generalities (for which one hardly needs a dedicated commentary series). This may be related to the fact that Thompson can never bring herself to label the opponents as false teachers (preferring to discuss how Christians should 'relate to those who do not believe as they do' [p149]!). Nevertheless she identifies the issues posed by 2 John very clearly: How can 'we live together with others in tolerance and charity, while yet preserving the purity of the church and guarding the truth of its proclamation?' (p149). Thompson's conclusion, however, is tepid (especially compared with John's approach!): the church must 'teach people and . . . nurture them in faith, righteousness and love', it must 'draw the lines that exclude teaching and practice it deems out of harmony with the revelation of Scripture' and it must strike a balance between the extremes of not drawing any lines on the one hand and drawing them too soon or too harshly on the other (p156). Now nobody is going to complain at this but I fail to see how this lives up to the editors' promise of applying the authoritative unchanging message of the New Testament to the world in which we live. Specific application of the principles of 2 John, where there is a clear biblical mandate for concerted and organised opposition to false teaching, for financial action against the support of false teaching and for training Christians in the apostolic truth of the Gospel, is somewhat lacking (we could certainly do with more of it in the Church of England). As a commentary then this does not motivate for the battle in the way that John's letters seem to have been intended. What it does do is offer an independent, readable and brief explanation of the message of the epistles and it has much to commend it on those grounds, despite being overly-cautious in application.

Dr Stulac is a Presbyterian pastor (presumably teaching elder) in St Louis. He shows wide reading among the commentaries and a refreshing independence of thought in relation to all of them! He is especially strong in showing how James' instructions (often thought of as isolated jottings) contribute to an ongoing argumentative flow. In this endeavour Stulac attempts to show that reading James with a view to applying the text actually aids the exegetical task itself, since the letter was written in order to minister to particular Christian churches. Stulac places the letter early, addressed to Christians scattered in the persecution referred to in Acts 8. In some ways James is an easier epistle to preach on, since it has so many built in illustrations and the flow of argument is not so crucial to his main points, but Stulac offers real help in relating each passage to the main overall point: encouraging persevering faith amidst external difficulties. He uncompromisingly applies a whole range of issues to church life (the true religion of 1:27; the evils of favouritism; the control of the tongue etc). He

continually highlights fundamental biblical truths and calls his readers to preach them to their churches: 'A true exposition of this text should be severe, uncompromising and authoritative in its condemnation of this evil, faithful to James' language, which is neither mild nor restrained' (p125 on James 3:5f). Many of these suggestions are genuinely helpful and preachers will find much encouragement here (see 3:13–18 on the craving for self-glorification in Christian ministry; or 4:7–10 as 'a portrait of repentance'). An appendix defends his view that the rich people addressed in the epistle are not Christians. The strengths of the commentary are its exegetical independence, its straight-forward wisdom in application. I think a general conclusion outlining ways of applying the overall message would have been very beneficial (this applies to all three volumes).

Dr Hansen teaches at Trinity Theological College in Singapore. His PhD on *Abraham in Galatians* has already been published, so he writes with a considerable background in the study of Galatians (his supervisor was R N Longenecker, whose commentary is often cited by Hansen). Hansen's approach to Galatians takes social division within the Galatian churches between Jewish and Gentile believers as the fundamental issue to which Paul responds. The basic problem is not Jewish legalism, but Jewish ethnocentrism, the insistence 'that all Gentile Christians had to become part of the Jewish nation before they could enjoy the full blessing of God' (p26). This approach, influenced by the new-perspective and often very reminiscent of J D G Dunn, takes the main features of the Galatian controversy—food laws, circumcision and sabbath-keeping (Gal 2:12ff; 4:10; 5:2f; 6:12f)—as expressions of Jewish covenantal exclusivism. Paul develops his arguments concerning justification by faith and the Abrahamic promise in order to counter the socially divisive imposition of such things upon the Gentile churches. Although often suggestive, eg on 2:1, Paul took Barnabas and Titus so that 'his team was a microcosmic expression of the power of the gospel to break down the barriers that had separated Jews and Gentiles and to create a new unity in Christ' (something I had often noted re Col 4), Hansen's social approach underemphasises the extent to which such barriers are determined by Torah itself: it was not only Jewish customs which split Jews from Gentiles! Hence the importance of Paul's redemptive-historical argument in Gal 3, which while perhaps the most difficult section of the letter was also the least satisfying part of the commentary.

As a controversial example we could highlight Hansen's treatment of Gal 3:28, which he takes as a portion of baptismal liturgy. 'All racial, economic and gender barriers and all other inequalities are removed in Christ. The equality and unity of all in Christ are not an addition, a tangent or an optional application of the gospel. They are part of the essence of the gospel.' (p112) This leads to the obvious conclusion: 'when men exclude women from significant participation in the life and ministry of the church,

they negate the essence of the gospel' (p113). Hansen insists that to take this passage as only dealing with spiritual equality as believers is to ignore the social context of Paul's teaching; but he himself has developed his position even though, on his view, the slave-free and male-female categories have no direct relevance to the argument of Galatians (p110). As so often, the appeal to Paul's inclusion of previously formulated material is simply an excuse to mask the interpreter's inability to follow Paul's argument. A more likely position is that the three categories represent ceremonial divisions within Torah itself; this would leave Paul free to appeal elsewhere to creation-based distinctives (1 Cor 11, 14; 1 Tim 2) which if Hansen's position were correct would negate the essence of the gospel.

In terms of application Hansen's technique is often surprisingly unsophisticated. The very first example relates to Gal 1:1: 'Paul's affirmation of his divine appointment also encourages us to affirm our own divine appointments' (p32). But this sort of application implicitly minimises the uniqueness of Paul's commission and not only introduces a totally alien idea (work hard at your job) but actually undercuts the point Paul is making ('I am unique'). On 2:1-10 we are encouraged to follow the eight steps towards the right hand of fellowship so that we can learn how to maintain the unity of the church, but this is to read guidance directly from historical account, and in any case does not work very well (eg Paul went up by revelation, and we also should follow God's will and be peacemakers). It seems that Hansen, like many preachers, prefers to apply the incidental details rather than the central point of the argument. Nevertheless, many of the incidental applications are genuinely helpful, and Hansen makes a real effort to personalise the commentary with references to his own experience in teaching, church in Singapore, wife, father etc.

In conclusion there are things to be learnt from each of these books. There is clearly an underlying methodological difficulty exhibited in the divergent approaches taken to applying the message of Scripture, but that should be no surprise. Some of the differences relate to the texts themselves: James is easier to preach from because it comes in preachable chunks and has built in illustrations without a lot of heavy argument; Galatians can hardly be applied with confidence until the fundamental point of its argument is settled and then the whole letter might have only one major application (Gentile Christians should not become Jews); the Johannine epistles have their own problems. What has been made clear to me in reading these three commentaries is that Thompson and Hansen had the most interesting arguments with which a reader might want to interact and argue but Stulac will make a reader repent, and then send him out to deal with the problems that James has addressed. His reverent and specific church-based applications of God's Word are a good model, even if James made it easy for him.



Churchman

**CHRIST AND THE BIBLE John Wenham**

Guildford: Eagle (IPS) 1993 222pp £7.99 ISBN 0 86347 095 5

This is a third edition of John Wenham's little classic *Christ and the Bible* first published twenty years ago by the Inter-Varsity Press. It is to be warmly welcomed as a scholarly defence of the position that what our Lord thought of the Old Testament ought to be what we think of the whole Christian Bible, a view which has weakened in recent years even among conservative Evangelicals. John Wenham has modified his original treatment to take into account three developments since 1972: first, the appearance of Roger Beckwith's magisterial work *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church*, which appeared in 1985; second, the weakening of current opinions of the authority of Jesus himself in such matters as biblical criticism; and third, his own changing estimate of which of the available New Testament 'texts' has the best claim to represent the original autographs, a matter on which he now favours the Byzantine.

It need hardly be said that this is a robust, scholarly and fair-minded attempt to defend and commend the church's historic attitude to Scripture. More than ever today such a defence is needed. The official churches are often hesitant and uncertain about what they believe; and the unofficial churches (as we may call them) often seem to be in danger of being swept away by the fascination of new developments. It is to the Scriptures that we need to turn to correct these enfeebling evils. This would be a good book to put into the hands of many younger (and not a few older) Christians. I wish this revised edition a wide circulation.

There are 20 pages of Notes, an Author Index of three, and a Subject Index of four.

DOUGLAS SPANNER

**REASON AND REVELATION From Paul to Pascal**

**Richard H Akeroyd**

Georgia: Mercer University Press 1991 xi + 130pp

No price

ISBN 0 86554 386 0

**THE BIBLE AND POSTMODERN IMAGINATION**

**Texts under Negotiation Walter Brueggemann**

London: SCM Press 1993 x + 117pp £9.95 pb

ISBN 0 334 00103 X

Richard Akeroyd is an Englishman who studied French literature at Oxford, the Sorbonne and the Université Libre, and was then for 17 years Professor of

French at the University of Louisville. He writes here with scholarly elegance and it is a pleasure to read him as he traces the relation between revelation, and reason operating independently of it, using as examples Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, the mystics, Montaigne, Descartes, Pascal and Rousseau. 'What will issue from this study?' he asks. 'That in the history of Christian thought, there have emerged three general categories of minds—the spiritual, the mystical and the intellectual'. The second two each offer 'an abnormal, less than wholesome, and incomplete representation of true Christianity, each emanating from one aspect of man's nature only'; the spiritual integrates 'all aspects' into a unity, conveying 'both a normality and a completeness—all that manhood before God is intended to be'. What makes this study so interesting is the way in which the author illustrates his thesis by referring in an unusually insightful way to the lives and thoughts of his subjects. His brief biographies contain details difficult to find easily elsewhere. He deals rather more fully than usual with Pascal, and while acknowledging his true and well-known evangelical experience (at Port Royal) he nevertheless critiques his misleading (because unbiblical) forays into both the *mystical* amplification and the *intellectual* underpinning of the gospel. It is Paul's *spiritual* thinking which truly exemplifies the 'Mind of Christ'. He draws attention also to the experience of that massive mediaeval intellect Thomas Aquinas (who had spent his most productive years 'baptizing Aristotle'), and to whom in his forty-eighth year (December 1273) there came 'a mysterious experience' while celebrating the Sacrament. He had at the time nearly completed the *Summa Theologica*, and when implored to finish it he replied 'I cannot, because all that I have written now seems like straw'; and later, 'Everything that I have written seems to me as worthless in comparison with the things I have seen and which have been revealed to me'. He never wrote again, and in fact died unexpectedly just four months later. Truly, all true religion is *revealed* religion.

The second title, by Walter Brueggemann, is very different, both in its heavy teutonic style (it is hardly an easy read), and in its attitude to Scripture. Here is a typical quote:

The world we take as 'given' is a long-established act of imagination that appeals to be and claims assent as the only legitimate occupant of the field. It follows, then, that long-imagined 'givens' can indeed be challenged, and a 'countergiven' is entertainable. (I take this to be the point of Kuhn's 'new paradigm', and I will argue it is the point of Christian proclamation that aims at conversion.)

This appeals to the ideas of Thomas Kuhn (a well-known philosopher of science) in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Every now and then, Kuhn argued, a great change occurs in the scientific understanding of the world; he called it a 'paradigm shift'. Such a shift occurred for instance when Einstein's Relativity replaced Newton's Absolute Space and Time. The

new view, he maintained, is incommensurate with the old: the world has now to be seen, imaginatively, in a new way. (Kuhn's views have however since been extensively criticized. Brueggemann's idea seems to be that something similar happens in Christian conversion, and his thesis is that the new paradigm elements that 'fund' the new imaginatively-realized world can be furnished by the Bible. He goes on in his last chapter to give specific examples of 'texts' which can do this (eg Deut 15:1-11; Jer 4:23-26; Isaiah 55:1-3; Prov 15:17). In interpreting them only a *minimum of historical-critical work* is required. In fact my impression was that the position expressed here is in danger of being understood as approaching that of Bultmann, who has been criticized as almost implying that it does not matter whether Jesus of Nazareth was a historical figure or not as long as the stories about him become common knowledge (see p 71). I do not know if I am being quite fair to the author in putting it like this; his style hardly makes this task easy. The Bible is to be taken seriously, but not necessarily as revelation in the traditional sense. It is to be quarried rather for 'funding' the postmodern imagination, whose 'speech' is 'in some sense evocative . . . and constitutive of reality'. I would not deny that there is something worth saying here ('your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams'); but as a statement of the biblical witness I cannot feel that it comes anywhere near to presenting 'the whole counsel of God'. Brueggemann himself likens his programme for preaching to the work of a psychotherapist (rather than to that of a herald), and this seems a fair characterization.

There are 17 pages of Notes, an Index of Authors (3pp) and an Index of Scriptural Texts (3pp).

DOUGLAS SPANNER

## **THE ANGLICAN PAROCHIAL CLERGY: A Celebration**

**Michael Hinton**

London:SCM Press 1994 389pp £19.95

ISBN 0 334 02552 4

Here was a good idea that has produced a strange sort of a book. After a sketchy first part 'Setting the Scene' we go through a series of chapters on the various aspects of the parson's life, themselves meticulously compartmentalised in sub-divisions, suggesting nothing more evidently than an assiduously compiled and arranged card index. Every clerical diarist, annalist and some biographers have been ransacked for details, running from George Herbert to Dick Watson—and a fair number have their portraits included as well. And then we have also interspersed within the compilation some of the experiences of Father Michael (as he prefers to call himself) of his own parish of Shepherdwell in Kent.

It is a strange book because it lacks authorial discrimination; and by its unawareness of historical dislocation as a result of diachronic juxtapositions it creates the shock effects of a kind of intellectual dodgem ride. Yet, despite, all this, it does give a fine picture of the Church of England through the centuries, of what its clergy have done and suffered and of the influence they have exercised in the life of the country. And the afterword with the author's own comments on where we are now and where we seem to be going is sane, balanced—and ominous.

ARTHUR POLLARD

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