

# Book Reviews

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*Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost.* By Craig S. Keener.  
Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016. xxviii + 522pp., \$48.00 Hardback.

Craig S. Keener, known best for his New Testament (NT) exegetical commentaries, turns his attention in *Spirit Hermeneutics* to how Spirit-filled Christians should interpret the Bible today. Keener earned his Ph.D. from Duke University (1991) and is the F. M. and Ada Thompson Professor of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky. Originally intended to be part of the Pentecostal Manifestos series, *Spirit Hermeneutics* outgrew its original length-limit and thus has been published as a stand-alone work. In this book Keener argues that a Christian reading ought to be experiential, eschatological, and missional, operating with a Spirit-directed epistemology, modelled after the Spirit-led readings exemplified by the NT authors.

The first part of the book advocates a reading strategy that is experiential and missional. The authors of Scripture intended their readers to apply their message to their own setting/experience (14). This reality is not limited merely to didactic literature, but narrative is also meant to teach its readers—we cannot arbitrarily deem something “descriptive” to render it non-applicatory. For example, Keener notes that Paul drew upon narratives for his doctrine of faith, and James used Job as an example for suffering and Elijah as an example for prayer (23). Experience, though, does not have priority over Scripture, but rather Christian experiences should be understood in light of analogies within Scripture (26–27).

As Christian readers of Scripture, we read as those “in the last days” and so in salvation-historical continuity with the NT Christians (51). The Spirit was specifically given in those days for mission, and so, for this same reason, the Spirit is still given today, for “Scripture does not prescribe a period of spiritual inactivity” (51).

Part two argues for the need to listen to global readings. Interestingly, Pentecost—the reversal of Babel—did not reverse the multiplicity of languages, it merely aided in understanding the diversity (60). In seeking to

understand this diversity, however, Keener argues that priority must be given to listening to the text of Scripture (69). In other words, greater effort should be given to understanding the “context” of Scripture than has been given to understanding contextual readings of the global church. What Scripture shows us, however, is that it re-contextualized the message of earlier Scripture for its readers (e.g., Revelation “updates” the OT; 75). Thus, biblical interpretation should do the same. Therefore, listening to other cultures will expose our biases and so assist in the interpretation and re-contextualization of Scripture, specifically in determining what was cultural or transcultural, for example, the role of women and the holy kiss (79).

Keener illustrates this point in chapter six which looks at how one’s cultural experience informs one’s reading and understanding of spirits and miracles. He concludes by critiquing the “honor and shame” culture of the academy that critiques everything but its own assumptions leading it to deny what Scripture plainly teaches (96).

The third section of the book addresses the issue of authorial intent. Keener notes that the Pentecostal tradition has often downplayed the original sense of the text (102). Often the Spirit gets blamed for a lack of study (109), but the Spirit is not a shortcut (117) for the Proverbs tell us to labor for wisdom (113). Scripture itself witnesses a concern for authorial intent when Paul accuses the Corinthians for misunderstanding him (138). He concludes that historical study and theological interests are not incompatible (146), but the original meaning should be foundational for all application (127). Keener then shows that it is faulty to think that a concern for authorial intent is a modern/rationalistic concern (129).

Keener argues, in Part four, for an epistemology that unites Word and Spirit, that is, Scripture and experience (155). He notes that our Western heritage causes us to neglect subjective experience as a source of knowledge. Yet, Scripture affirms doing just that (e.g. Rom. 8:16; 161–162), and while some can be too naïve with the veracity of experiences, many of us are unbiblically skeptical (170). Keener then shows from Scripture that “biblical faith is not a Kierkegaardian leap in the dark, but a deliberate step into the light of the truth” (175), before giving biblical examples of how experiences informed belief (e.g. the blind man in John 9; 184). The confession that Jesus is Lord should thus affect our minds (163), and so “following... popular scholarly opinion to remain acceptable in the academy... is not loyalty to

God's word" (189).

Authoritatively, given Keener's scholarly focus, he claims that one does not need to solve every historical issue before we can trust the text (191). Trusting the text calls for embracing its worldview and interpreting the world (and thus our experiences) in light of the text (204).

Section five of the book surveys some biblical examples for reading Scripture. Keener shows how Jesus critiqued the Pharisees for neglecting the "weightier matters of the law," indicating that not all the law was equal (209). Jesus also taught that Moses's teaching on divorce was not God's ideal (Mark 10:3–4) and so, the law was a "limited word" (215). Paul taught that the law ought to have been pursued by faith not works, just as for Jesus it was more important to feed the hungry than keep the Sabbath (222). In sum, the heart of the law is more important than the letter. Keener then applies this interpretive method to a modern-day appropriation of the OT Sabbath and tithing laws. In chapter 16, Keener shows that Christological interpretation and personal application are not mutually exclusive but mutually informing (246). Application is made "because of their experience of Christ" (260).

Though Keener is essentially arguing for a *Christian* reading of Scripture, the final section of the book evaluates distinctively Pentecostal issues such as charismatic television preaching and word of faith movements as the wrong kind of experiences (269–273). He then critiques appealing to the interpretive community as the safety net against false experiences; rather, Scripture alone fulfills this role (281). Scripture should not rule out experiences, but Christians should desire more experiences of the reality to which Scripture testifies (285).

It is hard to think of someone better equipped to write such a unique book as this. Keener—by trade an exegete of Scripture who focuses on historical backgrounds, yet an evangelical Christian who is open about his gift of tongues, prophecy and experiences of miracles—is distinctively able to write about a hermeneutic that does not run roughshod over the original meaning. His work also seeks to appropriate the meaning of the text, while also noting how our experiences take part in the hermeneutical spiral.

As a work on hermeneutics, Keener engages the authorial-intent/Hirschian debate and addresses postmodern reader-response methods. However, as an evangelical work, he presents an alternative, or at least a tweak, to typical theological interpretations of Scripture. Keener certainly wants to apply the

Scripture, but he maintains the foundational priority of the original meaning for application, the distinction between meaning and application, and the Spirit-revealed reality of the object of faith contra a Kierkegaardian leap of faith. Moreover, he argues that an “authoritative” interpretive community is circular, historical concerns are not modern, and it is not a virtue to apply the text contrary to the author’s intended meaning.

Not every Christian will agree with certain conclusions in the book, but most will be challenged. For example, Keener challenges a traditional reading of Genesis 1–3 wondering whether an interpretive method rather than the meaning of the text is being defended (192–194). Yet most sympathetic readers could at least agree with his conclusion on priority:

If we argue vociferously for a particular interpretive approach to the creation narratives, yet fail to respond with awe toward the genuine creator of heaven and earth, we *are not embracing the message with genuine personal faith* (199, italics original).

He also argues strongly against cessationism claiming that ironically it is “a postbiblical doctrine—the very thing that hard cessationists claim most to fear from allowing postbiblical prophecies!” (55). Yet, again, a sympathetic reader should be challenged by his call for Christians to experience more of the Spirit. For all these and more challenges throughout the book, Keener claims that Protestants of all people should be open to having their beliefs challenged afresh by Scripture (105).

*Spirit Hermeneutics* is a little technical at times. This will make it difficult for non-specialists to read. However, it should certainly be read by church leaders and included as reading for hermeneutic classes at evangelical seminaries. Through a robust methodology learned from the authors of Scripture themselves, Keener puts the role of the Spirit back into the discipline of hermeneutics, while avoiding some of the pitfalls and philosophical assumptions of other theological readings. The Spirit has been given to equip the body of Jesus for ministry, yet, in response to unrestrained, excessive and unbiblical manifestations of the Spirit, many operate functionally as though the Spirit were not given. As Keener asks: “if ... God’s Spirit were withdrawn from our churches, would (we) do anything differently than the way we do it now” (172). Hopefully *Spirit Hermeneutics* can serve as a needed corrective.

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*Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic.* Edited by Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016. \$36.99 Paper.

Michael Allen and Scott Swain continue their Reformed retrieval project with *Christian Dogmatics*, an “attempt to draw on the fecund resources of Holy Scripture within the context of the catholic church of the Reformed confessions” (2). This work, while operating from a distinctly Reformed perspective, is intended to benefit Christians from all traditions both in its reference to our common theological heritage and in its unapologetic commitment to Reformed thought. The former emphasizes unity from the perspective of the authors’ catholicity with other Christians, while the latter emphasizes unity by being honest about our differences –enough to attempt to persuade those who disagree. (This is catholicity at its most robust; not a tepid, lowest common denominator “unity,” but a catholic unity that acknowledges our doctrinal bonds alongside our dogmatic differences.)

The collection is straightforward in its organization, following the typical dogmatic outline: essays related to prolegomena (“Knowledge of God,” by Allen; “Holy Scripture,” by Kevin Vanhoozer) are followed by those related to theology proper (“Divine Attributes” by Allen; “Divine Trinity,” by Swain). Then come a group of essays related to God’s external works, creation and redemption. Here, the editors include a transitional essay, “Covenant of Redemption” by Swain, in order to bridge theology proper and the divine activity. Essays on creation include “Creation out of Nothing” and “Providence” by John Webster and “Anthropology” by Kelly Kapic. The other half of the essays in the volume are related to redemption: “Sin” by Oliver Crisp, “Incarnation” by Daniel Treier, “The Work of Christ Accomplished” by Donald Macleod, “The Work of Christ Applied” by Richard Gaffin, “The Law of God and Christian Ethics” by Paul Nimmo, “The Church” and “Kingdom of God” by Michael Horton, and “Sacraments” by Todd Billings (which comes between the Horton essays).

For the most part, the editors' description of the project – dogmatic renewal through historic retrieval from a Reformed perspective—accurately portrays the vast majority of the essays. Particularly helpful in this regard are the initial essays on prolegomena and theology proper. Each of these is shot through with a clear sense of rootedness in both Scripture and the Christian tradition. For my part, the explicit Trinitarian context given in each of these initial essays was especially fruitful. Many of the other essays also demonstrate a commitment to the Christian tradition, although those initial four stand out as catholic in that commitment, as opposed to simply restating Reformed conclusions in the name of catholicity.

As with any edited collection, *Christian Dogmatics* should not be judged on one essay alone. This volume contains, on the one hand, some truly outstanding pieces of Christian scholarship: for instance, Dan Treier's essay on the incarnation is a masterful tapestry of sound exegesis, biblical theology, and dogmatics. While I disagree with some of his conclusions (e.g., his explication of Christ's descent), I could imagine using this essay in a hermeneutics or theological method course as an exemplar of dogmatic biblical interpretation. Todd Billings' essay also stood out to me (again, barring particular caveats, this time related to credobaptism), not only for its dogmatic rigor but also for its devotional elicitation. Much more positive assessments could be made about these and other essays, but suffice it to say that most of the essays succeed in promoting a truly catholic Reformed dogmatics.

This is not to say, though, that every essay does so. One curious inclusion in this volume is Oliver Crisp's essay on the doctrine of sin. In it, Crisp, as in many of his other essays, attempts to provide a "minority report" on a particular doctrine and assess its coherence via the tools of analytic theology. This time, he appropriates Huldrych Zwingli's approach to original sin – one in which Zwingli rejects federal imputation in favor of a modified Augustinian realism – and finds it more satisfactory than traditional Reformed affirmations of the imputation of Adam's guilt. I found this essay curious both in its inclusion and execution.

With respect to its inclusion, one wonders why an essay that explicitly moves away from the majority report of the church catholic on the question, not to mention the clearly dominant position within the Reformed view, is included in a volume attempting to promote catholicity from within said Reformed tradition. While Zwingli is of course in the broad sense Reformed,

going along with him at this point in a volume on Reformed catholicity seems a bit like going along with Barth in his rejection of paedobaptism (among other things). Zwingli may be considered in a technical sense “Reformed,” but here the Reformed tradition has not followed him. I also found the execution of this chapter curious. I am not opposed to analytic projects *per se*, and I often find Crisp’s analytic queries valuable even when I don’t agree with his conclusions. Here, though, the downside to an analytic approach was apparent, namely, whether or not analytic theology can refrain from allowing creaturely logic to supersede the logic of Scripture. Crisp only cursorily interacts with biblical texts in his essay, even though the question of Adam’s federal headship or lack thereof hinges on a number of key passages.

At this point it is important to note that non-Reformed readers may disagree with any number of positions taken in *Christian Dogmatics* (and perhaps they may agree with Crisp’s rejection of the imputation of Adam’s guilt even while quibbling with his method). But this volume is not pertinent only to those within the Reformed tradition, however narrowly or broadly defined. It is, rather, an attempt to see one’s own tradition in light of the Christian tradition, and for this reason I believe it is beneficial for the church catholic, no matter the strand. That is a worthy project, for the sake of our own edification and the unity of Christ’s church. For that reason, I recommend *Christian Dogmatics* for Christians from all theological persuasions.

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*The Blessing and the Curse: Trajectories in the Theology of the Old Testament.* By Jeff S. Anderson. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014, 416 pp., \$48.00 Paper

The field of OT theology has been in a state of transition ever since the “collapse” of the biblical theology movement some forty years ago. This transition has opened the door for many fresh treatments on the theological movements of Scripture. Jeff S. Anderson’s *The Blessing and the Curse* is a welcome contribution to the discussion. Offering an interdisciplinary, thematic study of blessing and curse in the OT. Anderson shows that historical

and canonical approaches need not be mutually exclusive. Anderson's goal "is to trace trajectories of this [blessing/curse] theme through the disparate genres and collections of the literature of the OT canon, to explore the social function of these speech acts, and to apprehend the theological implications of those themes for the Christian church" (20). The blessing/curse theme, while conspicuously absent in some places, is nevertheless pervasive across a swath of biblical genres. Most notable is the role blessing and curse plays in prominent literary seams throughout the OT. Blessing/curse is a theologically potent lens for OT theology that takes seriously both divine providence and human responsibility.

After laying introductory groundwork, Anderson proceeds more-or-less canonically, unpacking the nuances of the blessing/curse theme in the OT. Anderson argues against a "magical" understanding of blessing and curse, instead utilizing the linguistic tools of speech-act theory. As "performatives," such utterances have powerful potency, but only when uttered in appropriate contexts by appropriate individuals. Anderson argues that both blessings and curses grow out of the doctrines of divine providence and election. The rich blessing theology that began with Abraham has a glorious destination, albeit after a long and winding road. Whether through Deuteronomy, Job, or Daniel, blessing/curse theology "supports the contention that God stands to enhance *or* oppose a life of fullness, depending on decisions made by humans" (348). Both blessing and curse play a significant role in the salvation history. Indeed, the message of the gospel is that Christ became a curse for us (Gal. 3:13), that we might be blessed "with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" (Eph. 1:4).

One of Anderson's most original contributions is an eclectic methodology that weds critical concerns with theological sensitivity. A few examples will illustrate this. Although recognizing the innumerable problems with Wellhausenian source criticism, Anderson explores how the blessing/curse theme might appear through the lenses of the hypothetical Yahwistic (J or JE), Deuteronomistic, and Priestly sources. This exercise only brings the theological themes of the canonical text into sharper view. The Psalms and Wisdom literature are the most difficult to synthesize when conducting such a large-scale theological study, but Anderson shows that his theme is prominent here as well. He argues that, in the case of the Psalter, each of the five books end with a specific blessing. (On the other hand, the handful of



cursing psalms are scattered throughout, appearing to have no relationship to the overall structure.) Blessing thus provides a loose structure to the book (if one takes Pss 146-150 as a concluding musical movement, leaving Ps 145 as the psalm with the final blessing). Likewise, Anderson's treatment on Job is masterful. He asserts that the major question of Job is, "Will Job really curse God?" The blessing/cursing motif binds together the prose and poetic sections, serving as pivotal elements in the plot and theology of the book.

Though Anderson excels in critical engagement and theological reflection, he falls short in his use of modern linguistic theory. Although claiming "speech act theory" as a key interpretive model, the tool is used only sporadically. Despite the theory's enormous potential, Anderson fails to properly unpack the nuances of performative speech as it relates to blessing and cursing. This is, unfortunately, a common trend in biblical studies, where simply labeling an utterance "performative" is counted as utilizing speech act theory. This disregards the complex linguistic activity which the theory attempts to describe. A glimmer of hope is found in the chapter on Job, where Anderson mentions three categories of fallacies that render speech acts impotent: misinvocations, misapplications, and misexecutions. But much more must be said than this if we are to properly employ this linguistic tool and take account of how speaking performs actions.

Despite this shortcoming, *The Blessing and the Curse* is an engaging, well-researched, and a fruitful contribution to the field of OT theology. Anderson convincingly argues that the blessing/curse theme is a much better alternative to traditional theological dichotomies of promise/fulfillment, law/grace, or old/new. Both blessing and curse have a significant role to play in God's redemptive purposes. This book is a valuable resource for those interested in OT theology, the role of speech in God's world, and the dynamic relationship between divine providence and human responsibility.

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