

IN THE STUDY

Anything Brueggemann writes in the Old Testament field commands attention. His recent foray into the field of biblically controlled Christian education¹ displays his usual verve. It is subtitled *Canon as a Model for Biblical Education*. It is one of the fruitful spin-offs from that canonical criticism popularly associated with the names of Childs and Sanders. It reflects the long overdue shift that for the last fifteen years has been taking place all along the line in the so-called "practical" areas of the theological enterprise - the move away from a wholesale capitulation to the criteria of allied secular disciplines and the taking of the biblical and theological resources with a recovered seriousness.

Brueggemann takes as his springboard the simple but crucial observation that the canon of the Old Testament divides into three sections, Torah, Prophets, Writings, and that the greatest of these is Torah. Each canonical compartment carries an implicit - and sometimes explicit - educational payload. "Torah" speaks authoritative tradition, reliable truth to be handed on via story to each new generation, a core of memory around which the totality of experience may cluster. "Prophets" speaks the violation of consensus, the wounding and abrasiveness of inheritance fractured, a poetical word that engages and reflects back the cry of the marginalised and outstrips and subverts things as they are by the insertion of new truth, future promise, social hope. "Writings" speaks the elusive hiddenness of life's sense and order, the patient discernment of truth and meaning by attentive dialogue with the world and with experience, a reading between the lines to find the strands of life interconnected and leading back to their tether in God. Add to this the insight embodied in the Psalms that the other side of communion with God is trust and that this finds its formed shape in obedience, and you have precisely in such "obedience" to a "holy God" the common thread running through the three sections of Canon. Put another way, the *educational* move reflective of scripture will be from the obedience that receives the disclosure in Torah via the obedience of participation in the disruption of the Prophets to the obedience of active discernment embodied in the Writings.

So bald a summary restatement does scant justice to a packed and at times complex presentation. Brueggemann further provides forty pages of footnotes that are a minefield of apt references. The whole book sparks insight and encourages the mind to race further along potentially promising channels. No educational programme emerges. Even in terms of educational implications we are given hints, nods and winks rather than cashable directives. Nonetheless, delivery is made on an educational standing ground that can lay claim to a basic fidelity to scripture.

The problems lie elsewhere. There is a sermonic quality to the argument; not surprisingly, since we are initially offered Jeremiah 18.18 as overall text. Sermons however are prone to

1 *The Creative Word* by W. Brueggemann. Fortress Press. £5.80. 1982

fit restless biblical material into a Procrustean bed for the sake of powerful effect. Just so. Torah fits neatly into the Brueggemann package. So arguably do the Prophets, until we recall that this division of the Hebrew canon includes the so-called Historical Books (Former Prophets). And by the time we reach the Writings, symmetry is wearing thin. In fact, of course, it is the Wisdom literature that really constitutes "text" for this part of the exposition, with the Psalms brought in to tie the whole sermon together.

The same kind of problem arises if we take Brueggemann in directions he does not in fact discuss. Suppose we take a leaf from the Tillichian book and set the equations up in slightly different terms. What might then emerge could be something as follows. Catholic substance = doing business at the same old stand = Torah. Protestant principle = critique of traditional manifestations of the divine = Prophets. But then - what about Writings? I hardly think we can tie them in with the Pentecostal or the Charismatic. How hardly shall those who deal in trinities maintain symmetrical logic!

Yet the total effect of the book that prompts such fantasies remains powerful. Insight into the Old Testament as such abounds. Educational sparks are indeed struck. It remains to earth the sermon in contemporary specifics. No easy task, I judge. Especially when you meet such statements as this (on the educational thrust of Torah): "The ground needed was a parental generation that did not doubt". Heigh-ho.

During the last ten years a steady stream of essays on the social background of the early Church has been flowing from the pen of Gerd Theissen. Some of these have now been collected to constitute a new publication.² It provides a welcome successor to *The First Followers of Jesus* (1978).

The binding together of originally separate studies results in the usual element of repetition. An instructive examination of the method to be used in sociological interpretation is curiously placed last and could usefully be read first. But these are minor negatives in a production that covers significant ground in impressive fashion. A discussion of the early missionaries divides them into itinerant charismatics and community organizers and uses the distinction as a key to conflict at Corinth. There follows a probe into social stratification in the Corinthian church and a painstaking sociological analysis of the problem of the "strong" and the "weak" which agitated that community. This in turn leads to an exposure of the sociological dimensions of the Lord's Supper tensions that occupy I Corinthians 11.

Is the method sound, and will the conclusions stand? Theissen's discussion of methodology breathes the air of moderation. There is ample recognition of the lack of obvious fit between religious texts and sociological questions and therefore of the uncertainty of results obtained by methods

2 *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* by G. Theissen. T. & T. Clark: E11:95: 1982:

whether "constructive" (direct), "analytic" (inferential) or "comparative". Such modest realism is reassuring. Further, since Theissen's concerns and approach are more socio-historical than bound up with the abstractions of social theory, he writes in terms that do not confuse the uninitiated.

His conclusions are another matter. His major markers will cause no particular surprise. In rural Palestine, the itinerant charismatic, the community of the excluded, the ethic of poverty, the radical pattern of discipleship. In the urban Pauline setting, the community organizer, the stratified church where the people of substance provide the leadership, the ethic of love-patriarchalism (cf. Troeltsch). It is when we turn to the specifics of the discussion, the precise social dynamics emerging from the Corinthian correspondence, the exact social configuration of the Corinthian church, its parties and factions, that the uncertainties grow. Later work from scholars such as Ronald Hock suggest that on points of significant detail reservations are in order. Yet not the least of Theissen's strengths are the breadth of his knowledge and the care of his exegesis. What he touches he illumines.

The Calvinist-Arminian debate³ over several centuries seems an unlikely candidate for a prize whether in terms of relevance or of excitement. Still, it has its own strange fascination and may be saying things we need to hear. Dr Sell at least believes we need to be prodded by talk of "proclamatory trumpets" and "uncertain sounds". Noses to the grindstone, then. What is all the to-do about?

Predestination in both kinds, you answer. Yes, of course. Not to mention the matter of the human contribution to salvation. The trouble is that once you venture beyond the bare enunciation of these lofty verities the plot irreversibly thickens, and keeping accurate track of the contestants has all the difficulty of playing tag in a fog. Consider only the more obvious hazards. There is the problem that Calvin (in this matter) was not entirely a Calvinist, nor Arminius an Arminian. There is the endearing tendency of the embattled theologians to think the worst of each other wherever possible and thus to label Calvinists as antinomian and Arminians as Pelagian. Faced with these and other perils, we may look longingly for reliable guidance through the maze.

Is this what Dr Sell provides? Substantially, yes. At times his hundred pages of theological tracking threaten to take on the character of an annotated bibliography and we sigh for a little more in the way of interpretation and overview and a little less in the way of wedges of references. But usually and eventually we reach a clearing, and although the winding path takes us to Scotland, Wales and the USA, as well as England, we do make camp at last. It is, as you may guess, a domesticated Calvinist that we find there to greet us.

3 *The Great Debate* by A. Sell. H. E. Walter Ltd. £2.95 pa. 1982.

The pilgrimage is worthwhile for its own sake. How far it serves the author's avowed concern with contemporary understanding and proclamation of the gospel is a much more debatable question. He recognises that he is dealing with one doctrinal thread in abstraction and isolation from others and that this has disadvantages. What is not so clearly recognised is the peril of doing history of doctrine without serious and sustained attention to the life-setting of belief and theological controversy. The theological blood flows through socio-historical veins and arteries and is significantly shaped by them.

That may mean that the contemporary responsibility is not to wrestle all over again with a theological controversy of the past which arguably ran out of steam but rather to recognise that its basic question may today confront us and have to be confronted in a quite different frame of reference. All the world knows how Barth reframed the predestination question. We need not follow either his approach or his solution to take the point. Transposition is generally necessary if the essential point of an old question is to be preserved in a new day. Some things, however, do seem to be timeless. Dr Sell quotes those historians of seventeenth century dissent, Bogue and Bennett, to good effect: "... there was neither Arminianism nor antinomianism to be renounced; but the ignorance of some to be removed, the bigotry of others to be cured, and many bad tempers to be mortified and subdued". *Plus ça change.*

At 11p a page even a slim book becomes prohibitively expensive. Direct application to the publisher may produce a small saving, yet the discouragement remains. And that is a great pity when the book in question⁴ is a collection of papers honouring Ronald Preston on his retirement and facing crucial problems of Britain's social and economic situation.

Preston himself provides a succinct summary and updating of some of the major positions he earlier argued in his notable book *Religion and the Persistence of Capitalism*. Duncan Forrester, Gerard Hughes, Edwin Barker, Paul Abrecht, Kenneth Medhurst, John Atherton and M. M. Thomas are the supporting cast who offer their own variations on the Preston theme. In the background stands the World Council of Churches' pre-occupation with the search for a just, participatory and sustainable society.

In a Britain where any meaningful Christian social theology is conspicuous largely by its absence, it is simple wisdom to prize and welcome any modest sign of a new dawn. There have been enough false starts and damp squibs, witness *The Call to the Nation* and *Britain Today and Tomorrow*. Not that the present contributors offer either a coherent front or a rounded theological perspective. In general they stand in the gap between theology and the specifics of social action and attempt to fill it. Perhaps that is at one and the same time their promise and their weakness.

4 *Christians and the Future of Social Democracy* ed. M. H. Taylor. G. W. & A. Hesketh. £18. 1982.

To step back a generation may assist a regaining of perspective. It is indeed a chastening experience to leaf once more through copies of the *Christian Newsletter* and its successor, *The Frontier*. Glimmers of earthy and prophetic creativity are not lacking. There is a sense that the right questions were being asked in the right way, and that guidelines were emerging from an impressive theological frame. The Oldham magic, we may say, was still working. And behind it all lurked the broader shadow of Reinhold Niebuhr. The Niebuhrian armoury engaged the social and political structures with unparalleled theological power.

By the late fifties all this socio-theological heritage was being quietly buried. It may be important to ask why this came to pass. Doubtless an adequate answer would require a complicated analysis. Two straws in the wind may however be mentioned. In conversation in 1953, M. M. Thomas - a contributor to the volume under review - informed me with some heat that Niebuhr had in recent years sold out theologically to the Establishment *status quo*. That sort of judgment may well have been reflected in an increasing turn to apparently more radical perspectives. At the same time, the biblical theology shift towards reading the specifics of social understanding and action directly off scripture was reaching its peak. A sophisticated theological dialectic stood little chance.

There is of course no mileage in unqualified nostalgia. Equally, it is easy to read the past through a romantic haze. The world - even the British world - has changed with unparalleled speed. What is clear, even without these present essays to underline it, is that the empirical facts and prospects of current social and economic situations are elusive, empirical projections even more slippery, and appeals to justice and equality provide no automatic compass bearings. Most of this book's contributors are understandably wary of movement in the direction of a command economy. Medhurst tables a plea for the unattended virtue of fraternity; and in this he surely makes a significant point. But how far will this and other collective wisdom take us without a theological undergirding at least as broad and deep as Niebuhr once provided? In our pluralistic and splintered theological situation, the signs are not propitious. Where indeed are the Ronald Prestons of tomorrow?

If we want to know where we are going, it often helps to know whence we have come. If the knowledge of yesterday can be imparted painlessly, gratitude is enhanced. Given these two assumptions, what can we do but finger eagerly a symposium⁵ that tracks English church history over the last half century in two hundred pages?

The survey is divided into two parts. There are four essays that focus on the history of various denominations. These are followed by six essays dealing with some of the major issues that all English church communities faced. The first

⁵ *The Testing of the Churches 1932-1982* ed. R. Davies. Epworth Press. £5.95 pa. 1982.

of these two sections is concerned with a task that demands either an historian or someone who has lived through the period in question and is therefore of riper years. In the event we get on the one hand David Thompson on the older Free Churches and on the other John Coventry on Roman Catholicism and Ronald Preston on the Church of England. Rupert Davies on Methodism seems to qualify on all available counts. Inevitably, slant and selectivity are constantly open to question. But against all the odds these brief mixtures of fact and impression escape disaster and serve as nourishing if lightweight snacks. The Preston panorama seems the least successful - not surprisingly, given the nature of his theme.

It is when we turn to the second part of this symposium that the serious hesitations begin to surface. In just over eighty pages we have essays on Other Faiths, Theology and Philosophy, Unity in sociological perspective, Liturgy (two essays) and Preaching. Surely an extraordinary selection and balance on any showing. Some are descriptive, some propagandist. Some come off (e.g. Other Faiths); some do not (e.g. Preaching). One is a small miracle of clarity and comprehension (Theology and Philosophy). It all adds up to a good idea which was never properly thought through or which failed in execution.

NEVILLE CLARK

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REVIEWS

To Be A Pilgrim - A Memoir of Ernest A. Payne by W. M. S. West. Lutterworth Press. 1983. pp.212. £4.95.

This memoir of the former President of the Baptist Historical Society by the present Vice-President is based upon what the author describes as "an embarrassment of material". Dr Payne left a journal of nearly 200,000 words, written in his retirement from his own records and 27 travel diaries. In addition there is a collection of letters from his friend John Barrett, Baptist Union reports and minutes, articles in the *Baptist Times*, plus of course the 70 contributions he made over the years for this journal.

Dr West says in his preface; "This book does not pretend to be a critical biography of Ernest Payne" but rather "it may best be likened to a series of transparencies which recall for his contemporaries and illustrate for posterity, some at least of the achievements of his life and of the adventures of his journey". The reader is therefore told what to expect and what not to expect. He (or she) will not be disappointed in the pictures shown for they present a vivid and fascinating account of the subject. Readers of this journal however may well want to know more. They will hope that before long "a critical biography" is written for the subject deserves it. Dr Payne's role, not only in Baptist history, but in the history of the Christian Church in the twentieth century