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# Imagining redemption

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many, even rival interpretations. The dispute about the Old Testament cannot come to an end, and must never be allowed to do so.... All this being so, what we hold in our hands is not merely one of the most impressive documents in the whole of religion. It is the testimony of a faith which has been able to inspire men and women right through the centuries, down to the present day: *Tolle lege* – ‘Pick it up and read it!’”

Roger W. Uitti

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## **Imagining Redemption**

David Kelsey

Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005

106 pages. \$13.30 Softcover

David Kelsey’s latest book, *Imagining Redemption*, is an important theological work for all of us who struggle to relate the difficulties of life and ministry to our theological traditions. The presenting problem of the book on one level emerges when the author’s friend teaches an adult class at a church and poses the question: “Will someone please tell me what the word redemption means?” His question is met with silence. Kelsey recognizes that it is important to reclaim (perhaps redeem?) the word but refuses to do so from the standpoint of conceptualization or interpretation. For Kelsey the key to understanding redemption lies in the particularity of its language – particularly drawn from Biblical texts which describe (as in the postliberalism of Hans Frei) what Jesus said, did, and underwent – and in the particularity of situations in which the term gains meaning. In the end, it is these commitments which shape Kelsey’s work and invite his readers to join with him not in “interpreting redemption,” but in *imagining* redemption.

Chapter 1 then tries to make sense of what redemption could mean. Kelsey identifies three areas in language which, supplemented by “Christianly” views of the same, help make sense of the term. Redemption can “make up for a bad performance” (the batter

redeemed himself by hitting a homerun after his first three at bats ended in strikeouts), “redeem from alien control” (as with a mortgage or a pawnbroker’s arrangement), or “making good on a promise” (think S&H green stamps). From a “Christianly” perspective, however, these understandings of redemption take on Christianly meanings: “God in Christ making up for *the world’s* bad performance,” “God in Christ freeing *us* from patterns or powers that hold us in their sway, “ and “God in Christ making good on a promise.” Please note the subject of these metaphoric extensions of the language of redemption. They are theocentric, and yet never loosed from the revelation of God in Christ. This belongs to a grammar of Christian faith that helps make Christianly sense of these meanings of redemption.

In chapters 2 through 4 these understandings of redemption are given concrete form by relating them to an actual situation: the life of a family where a young boy suffers from a disease and his personality is irrevocably changed thereafter. As it becomes clear that the boy will not recover and will struggle to be able to provide for himself, he develops further social problems, his mother commits suicide, and his father finds it ever harder to relate to him. In being so concrete about a situation in life, Kelsey tests his emerging views of redemption and seeks to show how an interface of Biblical narrative about Jesus helps someone to imagine what redemption might look like in these particular circumstances.

The book then ends with a “coda” in which Kelsey reflects back on the process as a systematic theologian. Here Kelsey shows that he wished to view his task as an imaginative one, rather than an interpretive one. If we are shaped by these narratives of what Jesus did and underwent, we are equipped to view experiences “imaginatively,” that is, to see them “whole”. In doing so, we are engaged, so Kelsey, in a kind of unsystematic systematic theology which is neither pure theory nor exhaustive “system”, but theological because it is profoundly pastoral and admittedly fragmentary in scope.

I found this book exciting to read because it takes theology and situations with equal seriousness. The care with which Kelsey writes is also remarkable. The book is wonderfully pastoral and yet the way in which it engages in thought feels occasionally like the elegance of geometry. Kelsey moves from one theorem to the next by a careful

procession of axioms (beginning with what Jesus says, does, and undergoes), yet does so with remarkable symmetry, elegance and beauty. The fact that it took a situation of evil so seriously to ground its claims only deepens my appreciation.

Nonetheless, it also pointed up for me the limits of post-liberal theology. Although the attempt is made to be particular both to tradition and situations, in the end the results, as Kelsey himself admits, sound a lot like modern psychology. Kelsey rightly points to the theological warrants which undergird his view of redemption (remember “God in Christ” from the exercise above) as a way of showing that the frame of reference is clearly different from psychology. Yet I have always marveled that post-liberal thinkers have never grasped the strangeness of the claim to derive theology from reading the Scriptures like a realistic narrative (Hans Frei) in a way that guarantees the particularity of the grammar of Christian faith over against culture. Is there anything more psychological than the way we in our culture read narrative? Although Kelsey views “imagination” as being superior to interpretation, I suspect that the distinction is less than helpful. The scriptures stand at the centre of what we do and fund our theological work, yet there is no naked eye, let alone a purely “Christianly” formed one. We all interpret. And that truth is nowhere no more plainly revealed than in those moments where we claim not to interpret and yet our culture’s own predilections (read psychology) move stealthily to the centre.

Yet even this does not diminish my appreciation for Kelsey’s work. Pastors will find the work important for thinking about how they can reclaim the language of redemption for their ministries. Theologians will appreciate the care with which Kelsey moves through his material and lays out his views. In the end, Kelsey may help all of us both to imagine and *interpret* redemption anew.

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