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Nahum-Malachi: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Elizabeth Achtemeier

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Jack Reese, Editor

THE CRUCIFORM CHURCH: A CALL FOR BIBLICAL RENEWAL, by C. LEONARD ALLEN. Abilene: ACU Press, 1989.

C. Leonard Allen's latest analysis of "Restoration theology," as it finds practical expression in Churches of Christ, completes the trilogy he began with Richard T. Hughes (*Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ*) and continued with Hughes and Michael R. Weed (*The Worldly Church: A Call for Biblical Renewal*). Pursuing many of the same themes, while evaluating several common concerns raised by the previous volumes, *The Cruciform Church: Becoming a Cross-Shaped People in a Secular World*, offers a strong and compelling appeal to God's people among Churches of Christ to live faithfully as a people who stand united under the Cross of Jesus.

While *The Cruciform Church* tackles many of the same issues encountered in the two earlier books, Allen's work here is more comprehensive and substantive. Reading the book gave me the impression that Allen combined the historic and sociological groundwork established in the first two studies to generate this challenging theological evaluation of the present status and future prospects for Churches of Christ in America.

Being a historian, Allen writes throughout with a finely developed sense of the past and its impact on present realities and future possibilities. He faces

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squarely the current "identity crisis" many churches and individuals are experiencing. Allen links our crisis of self-understanding to the reality and inevitability of changing religious traditions, the break up of our "rural world ethos," and the thoroughly secular bent of our day. Picking up a prominent thesis from *Discovering Our Roots*, he insists that "historylessness," the attempt by many of us in Churches of Christ to live above or without history as a people and a movement, remains the fatal error of much restorationist thought and action. Realizing that we have not adequately examined our own history and its very clear connection to the larger history of Christianity; and being very cognizant of the eroding power of American secular culture, Allen calls his readers to face their common past, learn from it, and chart a more faithful course for the future. Only in this manner will we be able to escape what he calls the "ironic situation of being a movement founded on a radical questioning of tradition unwilling to question its own tradition (or allow others to)" (p. 10, cf. p. 24). For Allen the faithful way is the "way of the cross."

The book is structured around what Allen refers to as "five theological 'identity points.'" Evaluating how the church interprets the Bible, how it understands God as revealed in scripture, the place it gives to Jesus and the cross, the approach it takes to the world, and the manner and seriousness with which believers exhibit Christ-like character form the structural heart of the book. In Allen's own words, "The cord tying all these chapters together is the biblical imperative to lift up Christ crucified and to let the church be known primarily by its faithfulness in following the way of the cross."

Allen provides a provocative and, in my estimation, unanswerable challenge to the Baconian

methodology still employed by many interpreters of scripture among Churches of Christ. Allen contends that Christians within Churches of Christ need to rethink their traditional view of scripture because of the ongoing influence of eighteenth century "Enlightenment" thought on the one hand, and a pervasive spirit of self-reliance born of secularism on the other. Ironically, this scientific/secular approach to scripture follows anything but the "ancient order of things." Allen counsels that the Bible must be rediscovered along with all of its strangeness and mystery if it is ever to be understood and appreciated by modern believers.

"The Church Under the Cross" is in my view Allen's strongest chapter. For Allen, "The most pressing question facing Churches of Christ today is the question, Can we recover the 'word of the cross' in its biblical fullness? No other question comes close to this one" (p. 113). This is true first, because our tradition has tended to "displace" the word of the cross, and second, because in our modern world "Jesus' call to follow the way of the cross has become almost unintelligible" (p.113). Allen does a good job of explaining how the word of the cross was lost among early restoration leaders who mistakenly assumed that people knew more than they actually did. Restoration approaches to scripture have tended to "level" scripture, making of it a document filled with equally important bits and pieces of truth that when patched together correctly result in a system for attaining salvation.

We have been a people impatient for the pragmatic with little use or tolerance for mystery. Thus, Allen tells us our preachers and intellectual leaders have not been able to "take proper account of narrative and the language of metaphor" (p.115). Once the cross is displaced, grace and its covenant power disappear. After surveying seven prominent, biblical metaphors used to explain the cross's significance, Allen concludes that the cross "provides the lens which focuses the distinctively Christian view of things. It provides the dominant vision of what life in Christ should be like" (p. 133). For Allen the cross and its distinctive message and meaning challenges both our tired, powerless, rationalistic approaches to God and the Bible, as well as the secular, humanistic spirit of this age which seems to be moving into our churches.

The historian emerges in Allen's chapter on the Holy Spirit ("The Holy Spirit and the Spirit of the Age"). Linking Churches of Christ with the tradition of "Believers' Churches," and then moving to discuss the five-part ethical/cultural model of H. Richard Niebuhr, Allen urges readers toward a view of the church that stands against or apart from the world while at the same time calling the church into service for the world. His insights about the Holy Spirit's indwelling of the corporate body of Christ deserves attention, as well as expansion possibly in a future volume. Allen's insightful application of his theory to the practicality of local congregational life is worth the price of the book for local ministers and elders (pp. 169-170).

The book concludes with an all too brief chapter relating dogma to ethics, and establishing clearly that Christians should never artificially separate these two important aspects of Christian life. Allen notes,

The church of Jesus Christ will be identified most clearly by the character of its people. The church is not primarily an association of people who know and defend the basic teachings of the Christian faith, people who pride themselves on knowing precisely what one must believe. Rather, the church is God's new creation, a people who have Christ formed in them, who walk by the Spirit and crucify the flesh (p. 174).

The marriage of doctrine and ethics results in a more holistic approach to life on the part of Christians. The result is a compassionate, imaginative, incarnational presence in a world in need of light and hope. By creatively connecting our movement's loss of appreciation for metaphor and mystery with its fundamental absence of compassion in a hurting world, Allen issues a prophetic challenge to us all to rethink the shape of our personal faith, as well as our congregational responses to the world. **The Cruciform Church** should be read by every leader among Churches of Christ. Unless its fundamental thesis is understood, accepted, and applied, the future of Churches of Christ, as we know them, is certainly at grave risk. Current discussions of a "new hermeneutic" among our churches should certainly consider carefully the message of this book. In my estimation it is more important by far than the first two volumes of the trilogy. In fact, it may be the most important book published by an author of our heritage in this century.

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RESIDENT ALIENS: LIFE IN THE CHRISTIAN COLONY, by STANLEY HAUERWAS AND WILLIAM H. WILIMON, Nashville: Abingdon, 1990.

No one stands on their own in producing a theology for the church. In fact, one may well argue that all theologies are "corrective" measures trying to reorient the church when it has followed mistaken guidance. So Willimon and Hauerwas did not invent (or discover) the "secular captivity of the church," but they are among the vanguard of writers who are raising storm flags within the ark of the church today.

These two authors have produced a number of good books that have taken up the problems raised by the cultural captivity of Christianity in late 20th Century America. In my view, no book they have given us is as good as this one—although I am a fan of their

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 other writings too.

What makes **Resident Aliens** so valuable, in my reading, is that it clarifies the issue to be faced and explains how Christianity got to the place it is in now. In addition, there are given some important suggestions as to how we may proceed to reverse the policies that have brought us to this present predicament.

The first three chapters, which I will review only briefly, recount how twentieth-century Western Christianity has too often let the culture call the tunes and thereby has already given away the game. The writers focus upon Constantine who made the church and the nation co-extensive so that the church became wedded to the state rather than the Lord of the gospel. This accommodation was especially pronounced in the U.S.A., where the mainline churches especially, and most others to a great degree, were/are persuaded this was a "Christian nation."

The rationalistic impact of the Enlightenment, which has been very influential among the Restoration churches, does not receive the attention it merits. However, that is really a subpoint to their correct main assessment. The authors illustrate how the modern church's intention to speak to the secular culture in language it could understand and accept left it with a smaller and smaller vocabulary. The church had no alternative world vision but only offered to bless the status quo with prayer.

The fourth chapter presents the ecclesiology of the authors. This is, in my view, one of the most important points in the book. What Protestantism, especially modern Protestantism, lacks most significantly is any doctrine of the church. The result has been that faith is reduced to the pious personality of the believers, and eschatology truncated to individual salvation. This book insists, "the fundamental issue, when it comes to Christian ethics, is not whether we shall be conservative or liberal, left or right, but whether we shall be faithful to the church's peculiar vision of what it means to love and act as disciples." (93).

This is also a point where, I believe, the Restoration movement has affirmed a valuable truth in the New Testament. For we have argued that Christian faith is a corporate faith, that the church is a necessary correlate of faith. For those of us who have lived our lives in the churches of Christ, it may be difficult to realize how atypical that we are in Christendom with our stress upon the church. But for most of the non-Catholic world, the church is a voluntary affiliate of faith, but anyone can be a complete and responsible Christian on one's own. The church is like taking the course for honors!

I regret that in my limited observation it seems too often as if this valuable theological insight is being bartered away—or simply trashed as restrictive baggage—in the mad rush to be like the Evangelicals around us. The theological import of the church is reduced to basically a therapy group. Again here the book makes a striking warning: "The Christian claim is not that we as individuals should be based in a community because life is better lived together than

alone. The Christian claim is that life is better lived in the church, because the church, according to our story, just happens to be true." (77). And again, "Christian community, life in the colony, is not primarily about togetherness. It is about the way of Jesus Christ with those whom he calls to himself." (78).

The fifth chapter applies the insights of the fourth to the area of Christian ethics—a thorough morass in Christendom today. The church has vital importance for Christian ethics, which are not simply Kantian (=individual) ethics done by a group. Here the book points to the value of the church in teaching us ethics and also calling us to account. "The church not only gives us the support we need in being moral, it also teaches us what being moral is. The church is crucial for Christian epistemology. We would not know enough to be moral without the colony." (94).

The sixth chapter asks what all this has to do with ministry. For many readers of **Leaven** this will be the most important chapter—if we share the book's assessments. What we do as ministers is greatly shaped by the master image we associate with our task. Is the minister the interpreter of Scripture, the master speaker, the pastoral caller, the nurturer, or "enabler", or what? Obviously there are glimpses of truth in all these images, and yet we must ask what is it that the church needs most from the minister.

Again, in my experience, I see a trend to make the minister another "helping agent" in the community. Sort of family services with prayer. This is perhaps too harsh and too general an assessment, and we are not (yet!) where the churches are where these authors work. The writers urge local ministers to be concerned with theology—specifically knowing the Christian story and its distinction from other stories in the society. They rightly note that this is just as needed by conservative churches as liberal ones.

Chapter seven exposes the vacuity of modern Christendom to face the culture that surrounds (engulfs!) it. One of my seminary teachers once observed that no one was ever a martyr for Zeus. His point was that Greek religion did not demand much from worshippers—nor promise much. It was mostly social convention. American Christianity is too much the same thing. It may be one of the most important things the church has to offer the world is something worth dying for—at present it has nothing. The American culture can only offer something that we are willing to kill others for—our possessions, our needs. We are on the wrong side of the cross.

This book, as much as any I know, shows how useless today are the liberal/conservative categories with regard to the fundamental nature of the church. "The conservative-liberal polarity is not much help in diagnosing the situation of the church since, as presently constructed, we can see little difference between the originating positions of liberals or conservatives." (156). The church, to the contrary describes **an alternative world** whose power rests with God.

My enthusiasm for this work is obvious, and most of my reservations have to do with the different

church situation the authors have from my own. For my money, if you plan to read only one “religion and culture” book this year—make it **Resident Aliens**.

**Wendell Willis,
Springfield, MO**

CARING AND COMMITMENT: LEARNING TO LIVE THE LOVE WE PROMISE,

by **LEWIS SMEDES**, Harper & Row, 1989.

Lewis Smedes is professor of theology and ethics at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California. He is the author of well-known books such as **Mere Morality** and **Forgive and Forget**. **Caring and Commitment** is a well written and extremely practical book in the Smedes style. The stated purpose for writing this book is “To find our way between the craziness of life without commitment and the cruelty of bondage to past commitments... .” Smedes deals with such matters as personal identity in commitment, friendship, marriage, and commitment to children. The last fifty pages of the book deal with what he calls “The Crises of Commitments.”

The strength of the book is its strong statement about the nature and benefit of the committed life. The ingredients of a committed life are presented as consistency and care. As Smedes writes, “Commitment is a way of loving as the fire of desire slowly burns down, and we feel a little cheated because the best thing we have ever wanted is passing away. But caring is commitment’s way of loving, not getting what someone promises us, but giving what someone needs.” This is a threatening way of life for those concerned with maintaining personal identity and habits. Yet, this book suggests that the road to preserving meaningful self-identity is through a life of commitment. Smedes follows Hannah Arendt’s suggestion that “without being bound to the fulfillment of our promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each person’s lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities.”

Smedes recognizes that commitments sometimes are, and should be, broken. As is typical of his common sense approach to things, his is a voice for reasonableness and redemption. “We keep our commitments in a world where even a decent person can let us down and betray our trust. When a person does, forgiveness is the way to cleanse our heart. But forgiving someone does not mean that we should renew our commitment to him or her.”

I have used this book in several settings. It has been great in dealing with the challenges confronting young adults as they stretch out of old commitments and into the commitments of marriage and children. It has also said things to couples who wonder whether it is any longer worth it to keep their commitment to one another in marriage. It is a persuasive, readable essay

on the importance of commitment. I wish that Smedes had interacted with biblical passages on commitment and identity. One can hear the words of Jesus between the lines, “If any one would find his life, he must lose it... .” Still the book yields great support material for teaching on discipleship, marriage, and covenant in the Christian context.

**Mark Love
Gresham, OR**

DECISION MAKING IN THE CHURCH: A BIBLICAL MODEL, by **LUKE T. JOHNSON**, Fortress Press, 1983.

The way churches make decisions in our fellowship is rapidly changing. We have gone from one extreme — elders as board chairman who approve everything from salaries to nursery curtains — to another — ministry leaders who have their own check book and have little accountability to the “shepherds” of the congregation. There may be no more revealing or perilous aspect of congregational life than the decision making process. My fear is that in a time when traditional notions of power and role are being reconsidered we are uncritically adopting successful, secular management techniques and rereading scripture through them. This is why Luke Johnson’s, **Decision Making in the Church: A Biblical Model**, is critical reading for us today.

Johnson claims two biases to the thesis of his book. First, he maintains that there ought to be a connection between a community’s stated identity and the way that they do things. Second, decision making by the people of God should somehow use the Bible. The key question asked in light of the second bias is “how is the Bible to be used?” This question is answered after certain preliminary definitions are made.

Johnson begins by exploring the nature of group decision making. He discusses the importance of making clear identity decisions that give coherence to task decisions. Critical to Johnson’s understanding of congregational identity is the notion that the church is a “community of faith.” What does it mean for the church to have faith?

In the response called faith, the human person asserts that God is not only “real,” but that God is what is most real. God is not a vague idea, left over when everything is counted, but is active and alive, and intrudes into human existence — into my existence — not only in the past but also in the present; not only gently but sometimes with rude force; not only in experienced presence but also in experienced absence... God acts now. And since God’s activity is meaningful, the Word of God is continually spoken and requires hearing.

Decision making in the church begins with the

Love: Nahum-Malachi: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching an assumption that God is actively speaking to and leading the church. He is not a watchmaker God who established the church on Pentecost and has left it on auto-pilot. He is stirring the life of the church by the continuing activity and fresh proclamation of the Word. The task of the church becomes discernment, or theological reflection. The community of believers is the crucible for discernment and scripture is the normative story that provides the framework for the telling of a contemporary story of faith.

According to Johnson, theological discernment is the task of the community, not the individual. While there are members gifted with the ministry of discernment (theologians) who help the community to articulate its story, it is "the church that discerns and decides on behalf of God. The theologian helps this happen by allowing the Scripture to speak to life, and the word of life to speak to scripture, and this within the assembly of God's people."

With these guidelines in place, Johnson attempts to fashion a biblical theology for decision making. The problem is there are few specific texts that give a clear picture of a decision making process. Johnson gives brief analyses of I Corinthians 5, Matthew 18, I Corinthians 12-14, and Galatians 2:1-10. One entire chapter is devoted to decision making in Acts with major attention being given to the events leading up to the Jerusalem council in chapter 15. Johnson's approach to these chapters is fresh and provocative. The Jerusalem conference, more than any other biblical narrative shapes Johnson's conclusions. They are as follows;

First, (the decision) is an articulation of faith seeking understanding, not in some abstract way, but in an immediate and practical way... Second, it is the faith of the church that is articulated... Third, it is the church's faith in God which is articulated. The basic decision, after all, is to let God be God, to say "yes" to the work of the Lord which goes before the church's ability to understand or even perceive it.

Johnson concludes the book by applying these principles to three contemporary issues facing the church where decisions must be made; the leadership of women, divorce and remarriage, and homosexuality.

Johnson's book is good biblical theology, and as such deserves attention among those of our heritage. It is my experience that this book is helpful in providing meaningful and strong roles in decision making for both elderships and congregations as a whole. It could prove extremely valuable to us as we consider the role of ministers (practicing theologians?), elders, deacons, and ministry systems as they relate to decision making.

ML

A HOME FOR THE HOMELESS: A SOCIOLOGICAL EXEGESIS OF I PETER ITS SITUATION AND STRATEGY, by JOHN H. ELLIOTT, Fortress Press, 1981.

John Elliott's book is not your typical commentary. This book is concerned with more than just historical, linguistic, and literary-critical matters. In fact, the primary focus of the book is to place I Peter within the proper sociological construct and suggest how the author is encouraging Christian behavior within that setting. With such an emphasis, new light is shed on the meaning of several key terms in I Peter, the most notable being *paroikos* (resident alien). Elliott opens up powerful avenues for preaching in his analysis of how I Peter is inviting *paroikos* to become a part of the Christian *oikos* (household).

In addition to the fine discussion on *paroikos*, Elliott's chapter on the household codes (I P 2.18-3.7) is very helpful. This book is not for the faint. There is much material to sift through in this offering. Yet, the insights gained provide valuable new insight for preaching and teaching. While there are places to quarrel with Elliott's work (his rigid use of the sociological description of a sect seems to predetermine his conclusions) this book is highly recommended for students of I Peter.

ML

NAHUM-MALACHI: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, by ELIZABETH ACHEMEIER, John Knox Press, 1986.

Given a choice of authoring a commentary on any Old Testament book, one would probably not list Nahum through Malachi anywhere in the top 5, or perhaps even 25. Correspondingly, one does not find in church bulletins many announcements concerning the preacher's new sermon series on Zephaniah. Thankfully, Elizabeth Achtemeier has mined this material to make it accessible and suggestive for sermon preparation.

This is not an in-depth commentary. Achtemeier suggests that this book be used alongside works more concerned with the technical matters of the text. This commentary, as with the others in this fine series, is designed to help ministers and teachers see the important themes and how they might lend themselves to preaching to a contemporary audience.

Achtemeier's suggestions are splendid. I found the material on Haggai and Malachi to be especially interesting and helpful. This book may not spawn a revival of Zephaniah sermons, but for those willing to visit these less traveled roads of the text this commentary will help make the journey enjoyable.

ML