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Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church, Luke Timothy Johnson

Robert F. Hull Jr.

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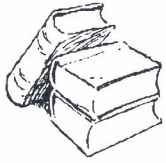
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Book Reviews

ELEANOR DANIEL AND MARKUS H. MCDOWELL, EDITORS

Character Forged from Conflict

By Gary Preston

Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1999. 157 pages.

Writing from the memories and reflections of his own experience in *Character Forged from Conflict*, Gary Preston gives an impassioned personal account of his struggle to understand and cope with the maltreatment he has experienced at the hand of the church. Any reader who has ever been involved in ministry and has had his or her work criticized will probably relate to the complex feelings and anxiety that are recounted. The author describes emotions that range from self-doubt and insecurity to defensiveness and indignation. Throughout these descriptions, the underlying thesis of this work is that God uses these negative experiences to transform the character of the minister. In Preston's own words, "Church conflict, I've come to realize, may be the most effective tool God has to shape our character" (31). It is within this struggle for integrity and trust in God to use the events in our lives that the strength of this book is found.

Individual chapters present a variety of issues that Preston confronts in his attempts to make sense of the attacks on his ministry. With an emphasis on the practical discoveries he made while working through these assaults, the author makes a number of valuable suggestions. A key realization that he discusses is the impact that these stresses have had on his marriage and his children. He also found that these seemingly negative events serendipitously gave him opportunities to deepen his relationship with his family. For example, after an unforeseen termination from one pastorate, he became "Mr. Mom," staying home with his children while his wife worked. He also examines the balance between being honest

with children about one's concern for the future and protecting them from unwarranted insecurity.

Other chapters present insights he has discovered in carrying out his ministry while under attack. Particularly poignant is the fifth chapter, "Preaching Through Controversy," in which Preston urges ministers to avoid using the pulpit as a platform from which to launch personal counterattacks against their critics. Other chapters encourage the minister to be thoughtful and deliberate in deciding which issues are important enough to confront. His guidance offers three questions to consider when deciding on the importance of an issue: (1) "Does the situation involve something that is contrary to the mission of the church?" (2) "Does the issue cause the church to compromise its commitment to being and building faithful followers of Christ?" and (3) "In one year will it make a difference in our church whether we dealt with this issue?" (133-135).

While the previous comments offer a recommendation for *Character Forged from Conflict*, this review also presents a caveat regarding this book. First, some may find the title a bit misleading, expecting to read a book on managing church conflict. Rather, this is a book about managing personal criticism. A second weakness is that, although the author consistently presents a genuinely humble spirit when criticized, one might be a bit surprised at times by the intensity of his reaction to what he perceived as personal attacks. For example, in chapter 4, "Resisting the Urge to Strike Back," he recounts the "scathing letter from a couple unhappy about a situation in the youth department" (61) and the ensuing "grudge" that he had toward these members. It seemed that any critique or opinion contrary to the ministry designed by Preston was immediately interpreted as carnal and troublemaking. The repeated

examples of times when he was attacked create the perception of an “us versus them” mentality in which the spiritual minister must defend himself and his ministry from the ungodly, attacking church member. One is led to wonder if there is any way to approach this ministry with a genuine difference of opinion. To his credit, Preston consistently seeks to avoid counterattacks against these perceived enemies. I am not arguing for an opposite and probably naïve extreme. Certainly there are occasions when ministers are the victims of unfair and malicious behavior, but Preston seems to see a demon behind every door.

Having one’s ministry criticized and attacked by others is a debilitating experience. Sleepless nights, and days paralyzed by feelings of victimization and insecurity are hard to endure. *Character Forged From Conflict* is a book that offers an empathic companion for these difficult times, but it shouldn’t be the only guide. While we need friends who understand our pain, we also need prophets who will challenge us to see how our own behavior has contributed to the situations we endure.

JACK HOLLAND

Dr. Holland teaches Christian Care and Counseling at Emmanuel School of Religion..

Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church

By Luke Timothy Johnson

Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996. 166 pages.

At a professional conference in 1992, I picked up from a remainder table a little book published in 1983 entitled *Decision Making in the Church: A Biblical Model*. Leafing through it, I wondered why I had not heard of this book before. Here was a professional New Testament scholar who cared about how congregations make decisions and who had thought long and hard about how to help them. Obviously, the book hadn’t caught on. Fortunately, as Luke Johnson notes, the book refused to die. Small numbers continued to circulate long after it was out of print. Now we have an edition expanded by more than fifty percent, re-titled, and issued by a

different publisher. It richly deserves a long publication life, for it provides “a kind of theological reflection on the nuts and bolts of the church’s life” (10).

Although informed by thorough scholarship, the book is not written primarily for other scholars, but for people responsible for the day-in, day-out work of local church life. There is no scholarly apparatus of footnotes, but “bibliographical notes” are included at the end of three of the chapters. A not-too-forced alliteration makes the chapter titles user-friendly.

Following an introduction, the book is divided into three major sections: Theory, Exegesis, and Practice. Chapter 1, “Definitions,” grounds the church’s decision-making in sociology, theology, narrative, and scripture. Chapter 2, “Debates: The Authority of the New Testament in the Church,” lays down some theses for the way Johnson believes scripture should function authoritatively in Christian communities. The New Testament functions as “author”; that is, it “authors” or creates a particular identity of the community based on the consentient witness of the New Testament writings to the core beliefs and character of the people of God. Secondly, the New Testament “authorizes” the church to reinterpret scripture in the light of “new experience and the working of the Spirit” (41), just as the earliest Christians reread Torah in the light of Jesus. Thirdly, the New Testament is a collection of *auctoritates*—a diversity of voices not always in agreement on particular issues. This diversity is treated at greater length in chapter 3, “Debates: The Literary Diversity of the New Testament and Theology.” Here Johnson insists that “we must...let go of any pretense of closing the New Testament within some comprehensive, all-purpose, singular reading which reduces its complexity to simplicity” (55). Rather, by means of a communal hearing of scripture in light of the narrated experiences of Spirit-filled people, the church has to hammer out its theology, has to hear what God is saying here and now by means of these ancient texts.

Not surprisingly, the exegetical section is the largest of the book (71 pages). Chapter 4, “Difficulties,” raises the question about which texts in the New Testament best yield themselves as models of how the earliest Christian congregations made decisions. The centerpiece of the chapter is an

extended discussion of Acts 15:1–35, the so-called “apostolic council” convened to deal with the crisis created by the conversion of numbers of non-Jews to belief in Jesus. After acknowledging the historical difficulty in reconstructing exactly what happened and the theological difficulty of deriving theology from narrative, Johnson points out that it is the process of decision making that is best illustrated in this text: “Only in Acts do we find a sustained treatment of the process by which the primitive church did or should have decided its future as God’s people. Only here do we have so explicit a picture of the church as church articulating its faith in response to new and threatening circumstances” (78).

Chapter 5, “Decisions,” shows how the narrated experiences of Peter and Cornelius, validated by the powerful action of the Holy Spirit, lead Peter to discern in ancient scripture God’s intentions for the present. Paul and Barnabas confirm and support Peter by their own narrations of the response of the Gentiles to the gospel and the confirmation by signs and wonders. James invokes scripture (Amos 9:11–12), which, especially in the language of the Septuagint, is seen to support the foregoing narratives. Finally, the determination of James requires discernment and decision by the council of apostles, elders, and “the whole church” (Acts 15:22).

Chapter 6, “Discernment,” gives critical attention to the problem of how to distinguish genuine discernment from manipulation by the powerful. Johnson finds in the New Testament a formal criterion and a material criterion to aid in this discernment: formally, the will of God is for the edification of the church. If a decision does not build up the church as the Messianic community, confessing Jesus as Lord, the will of God has not been discerned. Materially, the will of God is for the sanctification, the holiness of the church. Therefore, in its decision-making, the church must do what will set it apart from the ways of the world, with its prejudice, envy, competition, and slavery to the passions. Ultimately, the test of discernment is christological: the church’s behavior must correspond to “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16; cf. Phil 2:5–11).

Chapter 7, “Deciding,” opens the section on “practice.” Here Johnson briefly discusses three issues

facing churches today: leadership (the role of women in the church), fellowship (homosexuality in the church), and stewardship (the church’s management of possessions). He puts a premium on narratives of personal experience as challenges to the church to question its tradition. At the same time, he cautions against suppressing the biblical text and simply being moved by polls or pressure groups. Chapter 8, “Devices,” deals with preaching and small groups as ways of doing practical theology in a spirit of discernment.

This is an immensely valuable study that raises many challenges to the ways decisions are usually made in churches of the Stone-Campbell tradition. As Johnson says, “When bylaws and customs, or codes and unreflected Scripture citations replace the testing of the Spirit in the church, or, more tragically, when the church proceeds on the assumption that there is no work of the Spirit to be tested, then the church may reveal itself in the process of reaching decision, but it won’t be as a community of faith in the Spirit” (138). Despite Johnson’s careful efforts to subject personal experience to various stringent tests, many readers will not be satisfied with the weight given to such narratives, especially in regard to homosexuality in the church. Nevertheless, I know of no book that offers more theologically grounded yet practical advice for the hard work of decision-making in the church.

ROBERT F. HULL, JR.

Dr. Hull teaches New Testament at Emmanuel School of Religion in Johnson City, Tennessee.

Imagining a Church in the Spirit: A Task for Mainline Congregations

By Ben Campbell Johnson and Glenn McDonald
Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999.

Settle down in a comfortable chair for a moment; close your eyes and dream. Dream of a congregation—perhaps the one of which you are a member—that lives in and is empowered by the Spirit. Dream of a church where people are able to bring their broken lives to find healing. Dream of a congregation

where transformed lives are the norm, where ministry meets needs and disciples truly grow.

Ben Johnson, professor of Christian Spirituality at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, and Glenn McDonald, senior pastor of Zionsville Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, wrote this book to help congregations regain a vision—or perhaps develop a vision—of what the church would be like if it were in the Spirit. While the population of the United States continues to grow, membership in mainline Protestant churches continues to decline. Their thesis is that declining membership rolls, identity confusion regarding who or what the church is, or changing leadership styles in the church are not the main problems facing mainline churches. Rather, the primary problem is the loss of vision. In order to help congregations, pastors and laypersons need to develop a vision for their congregation.

Johnson and McDonald develop their thesis in ten chapters. Chapter 1 sets forth the problem that too many churches lack a dream. This chapter makes the case for “A New Church Vision.” In chapter 2, “The Community of Christ,” the authors begin to flesh out the particulars of what it means to be a “church in the Spirit.” Chapter 3 focuses on the problem of church members whose commitment and character lack the transformative nature of Jesus Christ. The authors prescribe an antidote to the problem in chapter 4 with “Prayer in the Spirit.” Chapter 5 moves from individual concerns to “Discerning a Church’s Mission in the Spirit.” The pastoral role of “Preaching to a Church in the Spirit” is the focus of chapter 6. This is followed by a plea in chapter 7 to reconsider and discard the church growth mantra and replace it with the homogeneous unit principle of “An Inclusive Church in the Spirit.” Chapters 8 and 9 return to the pastoral role with “Leading a Church in the Spirit” and “Teaching in a Church in the Spirit.” The last chapter provides some guidance with “A Final Word on How to Use This Book.” Each chapter begins with Professor Johnson presenting a theological perspective on the subject and concludes with Pastor McDonald providing “a corroborative witness” as to how the theological implica-

tions have been developed at the Zionsville Presbyterian Church.

At the beginning of the last chapter, the authors state, “The purpose of this book has been to provide a tool for examining the church’s foundation and crucial aspects of its life” (p. 150). Its intended audience is both lay and clergy, while suggesting that “students, whether taking their first degree or advanced degree, will find the book instructive” (p. viii). It is much like a road sign that points a traveler in a direction. The signs appear in oft-repeated phrases such as “the church in the Spirit,” “re-present Christ,” “God’s call,” and “God’s will.” Together these phrases get to the heart of what troubles Johnson and McDonald. The life of the church, expressed through clergy and individual members, needs Christian spiritual formation. Curiously (especially since Johnson is a professor of Christian spirituality), the issue is never put in these words. However, the direction in which they point is crucial for the church as we enter the 21st century. Clergy, laypersons, and students will all benefit from this book. My primary complaint is that each chapter could have been developed further and with greater depth. For example, chapter 4, “Prayer in the Spirit,” highlighted deficiencies that exist in many churches and in many individual Christians with regard to prayer. Unfortunately, Johnson failed to provide much in terms of help. He reviewed Jesus’ prayer life in a rather standard manner. Completely absent from his discussion is guidance on how to pray contemplative prayers, healing prayers, or intercessory prayers. Instead, he pointed the reader in the right general direction but failed to provide a map. This deficiency could have been addressed with a select bibliography, yet not a single bibliographical or footnote entry was included in the book.

Perhaps the best use of this book for a congregation would be in a class or with a small group of individuals that the minister would gather. The book could highlight issues related to developing a congregational vision and provide the genesis of a discussion of key issues. The group’s leader would need to supplement the book with other resources, however. During the study, the reader would find that the discussion revolves around the two interde-

pendent poles of church growth and Christian spirituality. Like the mainline denominations, many of our congregations face the problem of decreasing membership. This book points to deeper living with our Lord as the way to remedy the problem. It is a message we need to hear.

GREG BAGLEY

Mr. Bagley is the minister for the Lake Merced Church of Christ in San Francisco.

Walter Scott: A Nineteenth-Century Evangelical

Mark G. Toulouse, editor

St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999. 150 pages including index.

A friend of mine read this book within a month or two of its release. When I saw him after he had finished, he immediately said, "People talk about being Campbell-ites or Stone-ites. Well, I'm convinced that I grew up a Scott-ite." You may find yourself thinking the same thing once you become more familiar with Mr. Scott—one of the lesser known leaders of the Stone-Campbell Movement's "Founding Foursome."

If one were to look up "Restoration Movement" in the *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (InterVarsity Press, 1990), one would find no reference to Walter Scott. At that point one may begin to wonder, "So what's all the fuss about?" The contributors of this volume would answer, "Plenty." The year 1996 marked the 200th anniversary of Scott's birth, which explains all the recent exposure he has been getting. In fact, this book has its origin in two separate lecture series on the life and work of Scott, both held in 1996-97.

Among the notables who took part in this work are James O. Duke, David E. Harrell, Jr., Thomas Olbricht, Mark Toulouse, D. Newell Williams, and Fred Craddock. In this brief collection, the authors maintain a consistency not found in many such compilations—a consistency in both style and direction.

One contributor after another begins by painting a picture of America in the 19th century and then dropping Scott right in the middle of that picture. In virtually every chapter, the reader will discover more

and more about the setting and background for Scott's ministry. Questions addressed include: What (or whom) was Scott reacting against? To what trends in the churches was he responding? What societal influences shaped his mind and ministry?

The authors give much attention to Scott's distinctiveness by dealing with questions like: How did Scott's message "go against the (religious) grain" of his day? What would the Stone-Campbell Movement have looked like without Scott's contribution? What would it have lacked? While Scott may have been used to playing "second fiddle" to the Campbells, the authors of this work seem to claim that the movement would have suffered without Scott.

If you have ever thought, "Perhaps the beliefs of our Restoration fathers were so pure because they were able, somehow, to escape the influence of their religious surroundings," you should read this book. Almost every contributor in some way lays that idea to rest, whether each intended to or not. Harrell begins by painting a picture of the 19th century religious climate, illustrating how Scott was not immune to being caught up in the millennial tide of his day. Amy Artman (Ph.D. candidate at the University of Chicago Divinity School) follows by exploring the implicit creed behind Scott's (explicit) "no creed but Christ" message. James Duke then turns the reader's attention to Scott's work as a theologian, a concept that would likely have made Scott nervous. On a similar note, Olbricht follows with a discussion of Scott's use of the Bible, decomparring and contrasting Scott's methods with those of his contemporaries. In the next chapter, T. Dwight Bozeman (professor of American Religious History at the University of Iowa) searches for an answer to the question: Did Scott's ministry enhance or stifle the practices of spiritual life such as prayer, meditation, and fasting? Williams then highlights Scott's evangelistic efforts among the unchurched, which stood in contrast to the emphasis of Stone and the Campbells on reform within existing churches.

In comparison to other significant works on Scott (e.g., Baxter, Stevenson, Gerrard), this volume does not provide an extensive biographical narrative. Rather, it systematically surveys various aspects of Scott's ministry—a style that would likely find

approval by Scott himself. A few contributors suggest contemporary relevance by discussing what a modern reader might learn from Scott's work and thought. For example, Peter Morgan (President of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society) asks in the foreword, "What can today's Christians learn from Scott about how they learn of God as they move beyond the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason?" (p. 8). Later, D. Newell Williams prefaces an outline of Scott's evangelistic qualities with this statement: "Christians today, facing the challenge of increasingly unchurched communities, might well ask, How did (Scott) do it?" (p. 129)—the implication being that the reader could learn something about evangelism from this man. The book's practical quality, along with its conciseness, sets it apart from other academic works of this nature.

There are bound to be some who are frightened at the thought of reading a series of essays, especially essays that are historical in nature. I can hear the ministers running now. Put your fears aside because this is an engaging work. The book strikes a nice balance between academic and popular formats. Additionally, Craddock has the final word with his wonderful address entitled "Shall We Preach the 'R' Word Again?" The contemporary relevance of "repentance" is a fitting and practical way to conclude this compilation, which may very well become a classic in restorationist circles.

WADE OSBURN

Mr. Osburn is the Theological Librarian for the Institute for Christian Studies in Austin, Texas.

BOOK NOTICES

A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew

By Craig S. Keener

Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999. xxii + 1040 pages. \$60.00.

This commentary on Matthew offers a unique interpretive approach that focuses on the socio-historical context of the Gospel and the nature of Matthew's exhortation to his first-century Christian audience.

By merging a careful study of Matthew's Gospel in relation to the social context of the ancient Mediterranean world with a detailed look at what we know of first-century Jewish-Christian relations, Craig Keener uncovers significant insights into the Gospel not found in any other Matthew commentary. In addition, Keener's commentary is a useful discipleship manual for the church. His approach recaptures the full "shock effect" of Jesus' teachings in their original context and allows Matthew to make his point with greater narrative artistry. Keener also brings home the total impact of Matthew's message, including its clear portrait of Jesus and its call for discipleship, both to the Gospel's ancient readers and to believers today.

Thoroughly researched, the book includes a 150-page bibliography of secondary sources, and more than 150 pages of indexes.

The Letter to Philemon

By Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke

Eerdmans Critical Commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000. xvii + 561 pages.

This latest commentary in the ECC series is unique for its exhaustive study of the ancient world at the time Philemon was written.

Drawing on secular sources from Greece and Rome, from Christian writers of the time, and from other sections of Scripture, Markus Barth provides a thorough examination of slavery in Paul's day as background to a proper interpretation of Philemon.

This outstanding work, the product of Barth's lifelong research and completed by Helmut Blanke, includes a fresh translation of the letter to Philemon, verse-by-verse commentary focusing on important themes in Pauline theology, and a survey of the history of Philemon interpretation from the Patristic Age to modern liberation theologians.