



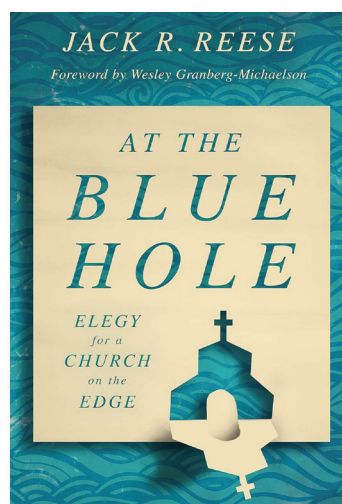
Book Reviews

January 2025

Section Editors: Craig L. Nessian, Troy M. Troftgruben

Review a book!

***Currents in Theology and Mission* is seeking to expand its number of regular book reviewers. If you have interest, please send name, contact information, and areas of primary interest to currents@lstc.edu.**



***At the Blue Hole: Elegy for a Church on the Edge.* By Jack R. Reese**

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021.
ISBN:978-0-8028-7952-3. 260 pages. Paper. \$21.99.

Using the metaphor of a great underground lake made up of pools and streams, Reese tells the story of the Churches of Christ in America that began in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1831. Officially the pioneer founders

were Barton Stone and Thomas Campbell during the second American Awakening movement from 1790-1840. Their Restoration movement was an attempt to reestablish the early New Testament church before the time of creeds and clergy hierarchies. They distanced themselves from their European Westminster Presbyterian roots over the issue of double predestination, opting for a stance resembling the Methodists.

The book traces the timeline of various strands and offshoots of this unity movement within the Restoration movement. One branch leads to the modern mainline Disciples of Christ church. The other, on which Reese focuses, are the conservative Churches of Christ who resisted becoming a denomination, having paid clergy, or church hierarchies (69). Aside from various strong personality preachers, such as Foy Wallace and T.B. Larrimore, this movement left footprints along the riverbanks they travelled that include pacifism, premillennialism, church cooperation, and early efforts to address racial inequities before the American Civil War. The golden era of the 1920s for white males was not so for African Americans and women's rights.

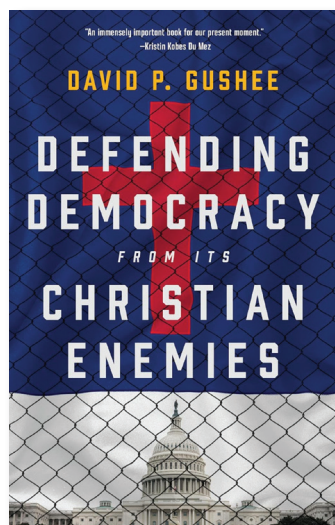
Two recurring themes that polarized this Restoration movement were the use of musical instruments (versus only singing acapella in worship) and Scripture. The latter deals with the questions of whether revelation of the Holy Spirit ceased after the writing the Holy Scriptures and whether the Spirit offers extra

biblical revelations even today.

Reese argues that the thirteenth largest church body is at the edge of death, alongside both mainline and conservative evangelical denominations, as the “None” population grows rapidly. Reese suggests that the Church of Christ communities, together with many other denominations, may not survive and will simply die. He does not see this as all bad.

In his blue water hole metaphor, Reese has six cloudbursts he believes can direct any struggling church into new life after death (210). First, churches need to have a thirst for unity and learn to agree to disagree on certain biblical texts. Second, churches need to restore things that matter, prioritizing ministry rather than quarreling over petty matters. Third, the need to discuss ideas reasonably without demanding a zero-sum solution. Fourth, being willing to adjust Christian behavior for the sake of the health of the larger church. Fifth, generosity in mercy and gratitude toward others—especially for those who are stubborn. Finally, deciding those areas for which Christians claim a counter-cultural identity. Reese thinks study of the Holy Spirit in Scripture can be a tremendous aid here. All churches can benefit from Reese's insights.

David Coffin
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***Defending Democracy from Its Christian Enemies.* By David Gushee**

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023.
ISBN: 978-0-8028-8293-6. xii & 223 pages. Cloth. \$21.99.

In the flood of books on Christian Nationalism since January 6, 2021, David Gushee's *Defending Democracy from Its Christian Enemies* stands out. While many books describe or critique the movement, Gushee narrows his focus to its anti-democratic aspects, situating it within a larger global movement he calls “authoritarian reactionary Christianity.”

Gushee starts with three introductory chapters that examine democracy, threats to its existence, and the history of Christianity's relationship with it. He links authoritarian church governance to anti-democratic political sympathies, argues that authoritarian habits in churches can combine with negative reactions to cultural shifts and harden into a rigid rejection of both modernity and democracy, and points out strong historical and ideological connections between Christian Nationalism and white supremacy.



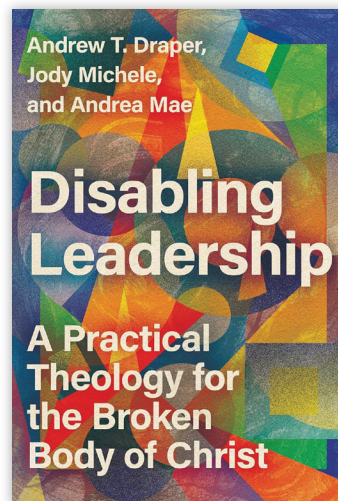
The middle section consists of short chapters on France (1870–1944), Germany (1853–1933), and contemporary Russia, Poland, Hungary, Brazil, and the United States. These establish a pattern of similar and connected movements where authoritarian leaders have teamed up with Christians in the quest for power. Discussing this international pattern is the most important contribution of the book. It provides context sorely lacking from many works on Christian Nationalism in the U.S.

The final three chapters sketch some resources to bolster Christian support for democracy. These come from the history of democratic forms of polity in the Baptist, congregational, and free church traditions; the black Christian struggle against white supremacy; and covenantal theology. The first two of these chapters are quite helpful. The final chapter, calling for “renewing the democratic covenant,” is less strong, despite fruitful material aimed at countering Christian Nationalism’s false readings of early American history. To name one weakness, the appeal to covenantal language relies on the rather flimsy assertion that covenants are democratic because the parties “must say yes” to a covenant, as if biblical leaders did not make covenants on behalf of others without their consent.

Gushee’s writing is concise and accessible to a popular audience. The book is a starting point rather than a comprehensive treatment. Perhaps the biggest flaw is the paucity of global sources. Most of the existing work on Christianity and democracy comes from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Sadly, these perspectives are almost entirely absent from Gushee’s text, despite its international scope. He missed, for instance, the work of the Indian theologian Felix Wilfred, whose decades of responding to Hindu Nationalism have made him one of the foremost Christian authorities on religious nationalism and democracy. While Gushee’s bibliography includes some international news sources, it does not cite a single book published outside of the US and UK.

Many of the books prompted by the rise of Christian Nationalism help us better understand and strengthen the church today. For those looking for other recommendations, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicalism in an Age of Extremism* (Harper, 2023) by Tim Alberta provides a careful account of the movement, while *The Seven Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022) by Carter Heyward offers a focused theological analysis. Alongside these, Gushee’s text makes my top three recommendations for one reason: we ignore the anti-democratic elements within Christianity at our peril.

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Disabling Leadership: A Practical Theology for the Broken Body of Christ. By Andrew T. Draper, Jody Michele, and Andrea Mae.

Downers Grove, Illinois:
InterVarsity Press Academic, 2023.
ISBN: 978-1-5140-0335-0. xxviii
& 178 pages. Paper. \$20.54.

As part of the series from the Center for Disability and Ministry, throughout this book the authors draw

on their personal backgrounds and their experiences, including as staff at Urban Light Church in Muncie, Indiana. Jody Michele is a disability advocate and minister with cerebral palsy. Andrea May is a special education service provider, and the mother of three children with disabilities. Andrew T. Draper is a pastor and theologian who lives with severe obsessive-compulsive disorder. He is husband to an educational administrator, who leads an inclusive school and who herself lives with limitations due to rheumatological disorders. Together, they parent their son who is autistic. Throughout the book, the three authors both offer their individually formulated observations and analyses, and also write in concert.

In Chapter One, “A Theology of Leadership and Disability,” the authors present a review of a leadership literature by Andrew Draper, an exploration by Andrea May of the inclusive body language from 1 Corinthians 12, and an examination by Jodi Michele of the disabilities studies literature to put forward an anti-ableist view of leadership, offering the body of Christ as a compelling vision in pursuit of justice.

Henri Nouwen’s book, *In the Name of Jesus*, is held up by Draper as offering a sound vision of Christian leadership, informed by Nouwen’s own work with people who had visible and often significant disabilities. Jodi Michelle examines the writings of Joni Eareckson Tada, Nancy Eisland, Judy Heumann, and Amos Yong as she collaborates with Draper in interrogating important signposts of anti-ableist leadership.

Chapter Two “Learning from People with Disabilities,” includes close scrutiny of the *imago Dei*. In one page, the works of Thomas Aquinas, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jean Vanier, Irenaeus, Karl Barth, and D.G.A. Clines are referenced. Beginning with the work of disability theologian Brian Brock (*Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ’s Body*), all three authors offer, with painful precision but without rancor, their own deep perspectives on personal challenges they have faced.

After providing numerous personal experiences and reflections, the authors conclude, “...We have seen that humans are humans by the gift and the grace of God who calls us to represent



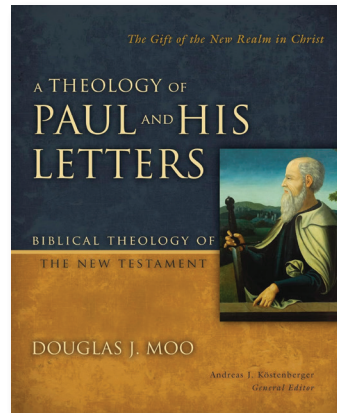
God in the ways God desires. Our humanity does not consist in our capacities or our attributes. Our humanity consists in being named by the Creator, who calls us. This includes our limitations... We come to these conclusions by listening to and learning from people with disabilities as we read Scripture and inhabit shared spaces together” (82-83).

In chapter Three, “Inclusive Church Leadership,” the authors lift up their central theme by emphasizing an inclusive table, as uniquely found in each congregation. The sharing of power is beautifully discussed as the authors reference work from the Commission on Faith and Order from the World Council of Churches, and from Brené Brown writing on power and leadership, including reflections on the writings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his speech to striking sanitation workers in Memphis. The chapter concludes with numerous pragmatic and specific actions that can be undertaken to help ensure full participation in the leadership of congregations for people with a variety of disabilities.

In the final chapter, “Creating an Accessible Community,” the authors offer the observation, “Becoming a Christian community that is inclusive of people with disabilities is a deeply embodied process” (108). There follows a practical discussion of the realities involved with worship, preaching, and Christian education. The authors reference the concepts of responsive design and universal design, noting factors that include lighting, music volume, and the attitudes of people in the congregation toward those who worship differently or require accommodations. They conclude with a discussion of “universal design for learning,” and specific measures to be undertaken to ensure such a context. Finally, disability justice and advocacy are considered, including the pungent observation that “The church must resist being partisan, but cannot avoid being political” (153). In the thoughtful and compelling Conclusion, the authors return briefly to Nouwen’s reflections to remind us that leadership in the way of Jesus requires a “fundamentally different posture” from those of an executive leader in a different context, noting, “‘Success oriented’ approaches usually orbit around ableist conceptions of leadership” (168).

This deeply thoughtful, practical, and stimulating work should prove valuable both for readers who are familiar with the ever-expanding resources for disability in the church and for those readers who are just beginning. Written from their unique perspectives, the authors powerfully exemplify what they so effectively lift up: leadership in the church by people with disabilities.

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The Gift of the New Realm in Christ: A Theology of Paul and His Letters. By Douglas J. Moo

Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Academic, 2021. ISBN: 978-0-3102-7090-4. xxxii & 749 pages. Cloth. \$54.99.

As Pauline scholarship explodes in a thousand directions, Moo presents a coherent and academically engaged account of Paul’s theology. He navigates myriad interpretive issues without getting bogged down by the field’s diversity. Perhaps even more impressively, Moo charts a path through the chaos.

The book is structured in three parts. In part one, Moo briefly presents his definition of biblical theology and outlines the task at hand. This section concludes with a defense of his thesis: Paul’s theological worldview is shaped by salvation history, the organizing concept for Paul’s theology is “the new realm,” and the “webbing that knits together” Paul’s theology is union with Christ (27).

Before assembling the puzzle, Moo dedicates 300 pages to laying out the individual pieces. Part two sketches the context, argument, and theological content of each of the thirteen canonical Pauline letters. Here, Moo’s expertise and deep familiarity with these letters shine. The section is scripturally rigorous without feeling meticulous. Along the way, Moo addresses significant issues in Pauline scholarship as they come to bear on key texts. The result is a thoroughly theological commentary on the entire Pauline corpus that consistently presses beyond mere description to theological conclusions. Even without parts one and three, section two would stand apart for its combination of rich theological insight, whole-bible integration, and brevity.

Part three is also 300 pages. Here, Moo brings the content of Paul’s letters into a synthetic whole. Section three showcases “biblical theology” at its best. Moo treats classical theological loci (Christology, soteriology, anthropology, ecclesiology, etc.), but he uses categories native to Paul’s thought. His organization of Paul’s theology within the framework of “the new realm” is convincing. It gives fresh expression to traditional theological ideas and shows how themes in Pauline theology fit together. At times, the metaphors are a bit lumbering: the “new realm” has a “center,” “routes,” “contours,” and “landforms.” Using scripture’s language (e.g., “kingdom” rather than “realm”) would have made it easier for readers to see connections between Paul’s theology and the teaching and life of Jesus.

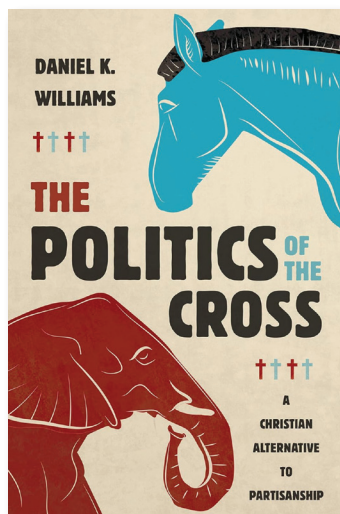
Moo engages with interlocutors most in this section. His argumentation is refreshingly lucid, scripturally grounded, and thoroughly non-hyperbolic. Moo has a bias for the middle, and



he often ends up defending the general Reformation consensus. So, readers broadly familiar with Reformed theology will find few surprising conclusions. Moo's moderatism may be a weakness. For example, the radical freedom and explosive political potential of Paul's gospel, which other scholars have highlighted, get relatively short shrift. On the other hand, his focus is a strength. In a scholarly and political environment where centrism is rare, Moo's work exemplifies scholarship that listens well to counter-arguments, incorporating insight even from intellectual opponents, while still providing strong, defensible conclusions.

This book is an exceptional overview of the theology of Paul's letters. Expert commentary on all thirteen letters and an expansive bibliography make it a helpful resource for anyone trying to understand Paul's thought or to get their footing in the ever-shifting territory of Pauline scholarship.

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The Politics of the Cross: A Christian Alternative to Partisanship. By Daniel K. Williams

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021.
ISBN 978-0-8028-7851-9. 326 pages. Cloth. \$27.99.

The author offers this judicious and well-balanced effort to educate and move Christians (chiefly his fellow evangelicals) to a less partisan and more deeply

Gospel-orientation to the critical policy and political issues that seriously divide Americans today. Williams, a well-published historian of American history and politics, begins by carefully scanning in successive chapters the history of the Republican and Democratic Parties from the time of their founding in pre-Civil War times to our current highly contentious and partisan days. Today the majority of evangelicalism has come to identify with the GOP, while the Democratic Party is typified by what he calls its "secularized liberal Protestantism" despite considerable numbers of Roman Catholics and black evangelicals (as well as Jews and Muslims) who claim Democratic Party affiliation.

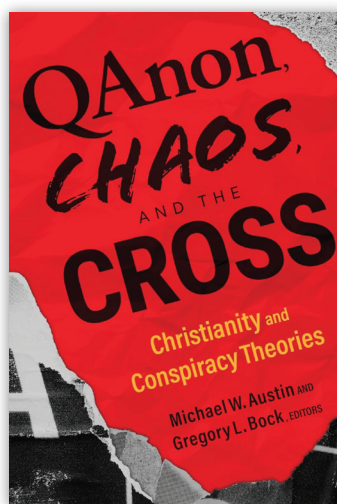
As a historian who also happens to be Lutheran, I take issue with the broad brush with which Williams paints, while also dismissing, mainline Christians as "secularized liberals" in contrast to "Bible-believing evangelicals." For the author, one's view of abortion marks whether one is a Bible-believing Christian or not. No mention is made of carefully nuanced efforts by denominations, such as the ELCA, to craft positions that intend

both to be broadly pro-life and affirm a woman's preeminence in making a momentous personal decision. To his credit, the author does recognize the complexity of the issue and how often anti-abortion activism does not reflect a commitment to broadly "pro-life" policies toward women or children, nor for that matter on capital punishment or gun control.

The reader is consistently urged to probe deeply the overall impact of a proposed policy on the "least of these" rather than assuming that the "rightness" of one's righteous cause is sufficient in itself. Well-researched chapters on "Marriage and Sexuality," "Race," and "Wealth and Poverty," trace the two parties' varying positions regarding these broad areas of concern in American life. Williams offers plenty of latitude to suggest that both parties over time have manifested biblically informed positions while also failing to do so. He detects a tendency for Republicans to err on the side of attempting to legislate biblical morality, while Democrats have favored state intervention in economic and social legislation on behalf of the disadvantaged.

Perhaps, not surprisingly, concern for a "politics of the cross" in the work of a historian seems more rhetorical than theologically substantive, equivalent to a "politics of humility" or "neighbor love." While the topics dealt with are central and fairly discussed, the book lacks acknowledgement of other critically important issues that divide the parties, such as global climate change. The concluding section on "For Further Reading" is most helpful; the annotated bibliography and the footnotes are extensive.

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QAnon, Chaos, and the Cross: Christianity and Conspiracy Theories. Edited by Michael W. Austin and Gregory L. Bock

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023.
ISBN:978-0-8028-8263-3. Paper.
\$24.99.

This book of twenty-four essays by assorted authors from various disciplines identifies modern conspiracies and those who are susceptible to believing them to be true. QAnon is one such effort to misapply spiritual warfare from biblical texts (Ephesians 6) to demonize or strip the humanity of opponents—that they are nothing less than cockroaches, rats, and cancer (196). In one survey more than one half of all American pastors hear church members openly repeat such conspiracy theories as QAnon (223). Briefly defined, QAnon argues that Donal Trump is fighting a cabal of pedophiles and traffick-



ers run by Democrats, Hollywood elites, and, in some versions, aliens. Despite the efforts of church leaders to argue that QAnon is incompatible with faith and mission, many American evangelical Christians think the conspiracy is true (149-150).

People who develop a passion or set aside their otherwise reasonable logic to believe in such conspiracies seek simplistic narratives to explain complex problems. They search out media sites that reinforce previously decided conclusions to create an echo chamber of likeminded believers in a given theory, such as there being a “deep state” within national government (228-231). Their partisanship uses absolutist categories of thinking. This means one cannot be a Democrat and a Christian at the same time.

Their followers are prone to accept the derogatory attacks by conspiracy leaders who obtain power and visible recognition they otherwise did not earn through learning, expertise, or professional credentials. One conservative magazine that exposed such as scam regarding Satanism, was scorned and closed. A teacher who holds evidence to disagree with such conspiracy leaders is torched. Thus, clergy with theological credentials to disagree with such conspirators are to be warned that they may be torched. The means justifies the ends in this tribalistic way of thinking. Christian nationalism is a prime example of selective Bible passages taken out of context (198-202).

How might a Christian respond in one-on-one conversations? Early in the book the author suggests 3 “P’s.” First, paraphrase what the person has said regarding a particular conspiracy to make sure they know you are articulating the views correctly. Second, praise the person for the time, research, and passion they have put into this belief. Finally, probe in a nonthreatening way any questions or contradictions, telling them, “I am going to push back now.” The person usually has planned *ad hoc* explanations for any objections. They will dig their heels in deeper if they feel attacked. The best outcome one can have is to plant seeds of doubt and keep the door open for future conversation. The key biblical text of the authors is John 14:6: Jesus as the truth and carefully following his example in trying to stand one’s ground, while keeping the conversations civil (1).

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Raising America: Building a More Perfect Union. Edited by Charles R. Kniker and Dianne Prichard

Ames, Iowa: Heuss, 2024. 978-0-9983-1285-9. xvi & 203 pages. Paper. \$22.00.

It is easy to find books that describe and lament the current fragile state of democracy in the United States. *Raising America* is a

beginning toward actively strengthening democracy by equipping people with the information, resources, and skills needed to challenge threats to the democratic system and bring about positive change.

The title, *Raising America*, builds upon the concept of a communal barn-raising where neighbors put aside their differences to work for the common good. This book is at its best when the authors emphasize the communitarian nature of the process. Their goal is to help people engage in dialogue and find shared values and concerns. The emphasis is on empowering people to hold meaningful political conversations with people holding diverse opinions.

The book is divided into five parts which move from basic civics lessons to particular issues and then to action steps. The book’s format is one of its greatest strengths. Each chapter begins with “Why Should I Read this Chapter?” and a clear statement about the goal and motivation for that chapter with quotes that help set up the content.

The content is presented in a reader-friendly format with accessible language in short chapters. A list of resources, including theological resources, is provided. An action section for individuals and groups concludes each chapter.

The authors bring together several valuable resources. For example, to hold meaningful conversations around shared values they suggest the work of the Civil Conversations Project, Make America Dinner Again, Braver Angels, and the Center for Courage and Renewal. Having all these resources gathered in one place makes this book a useful resource.

Some of the book’s strengths also lead to some of its weaknesses. Due to each chapter’s brevity, details and nuances are lost which detract from the message, even in the basic civics section. Some chapters lose focus and address issues of concern to the author, such as homelessness and interfaith dialogue, without linking these topics clearly to threats to American democracy.

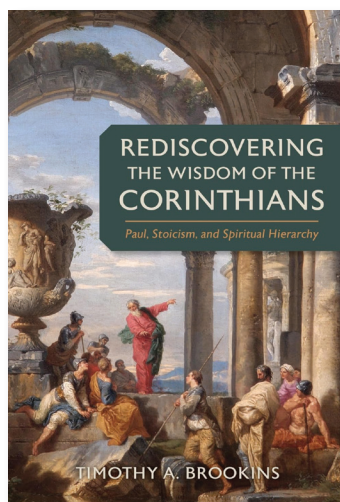
Unfortunately, the book does not live up to its claim of being non-partisan. All the threats to democracy appear to come from the political right, including Donald Trump’s presidential candidacy, Project 2025, and Christian Nationalism. Threats



to democracy from the left are not scrutinized. Liberal political buzzwords as woke/awakened culture are used. A blog from John Pavlovitz, “No I Can’t Agree to Disagree Over Trump: You Are Wrong,” with its stereotyping of Trump supporters, undoes much of the good in the rest of the book.

Raising America will not save American democracy. It does, however, provide a series of useful resources for those who wish to engage in civil conversation about our civic life together. It can be a valuable discussion starter for groups looking at these issues. The final action steps demonstrate clear ways for people to become more involved in their communities and American democracy.

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Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Corinthians: Paul, Stoicism, and Spiritual Hierarchy. By Timothy A. Brookins

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024.
ISBN: 978-0-8028-8323-0. xiv & 354 pages. Cloth. \$64.99.

Following a twelve-year pause, Timothy Brookins has returned to the topic of his 2012 revised dissertation, *Corinthian Wis-*

dom, Stoic Philosophy, and the Ancient Economy. In this newer work he focuses on 1 Corinthians 1–4 and delves into greater detail than the first study allowed.

At the center of his research is the proper understanding in 1 Corinthians of the word “wisdom” (*sophia*). Is it to be understood in relationship to rhetoric, the current dominant view, so that Paul’s opponents think he is not rhetorically wise? Or is the word to be understood in relationship to philosophy, specifically Stoicism?

Following detailed and sophisticated analysis of Stoic thought, exegetical study, and exploration of philosophical activity in the Roman Empire and explicitly in Corinth, Brookins concludes that wealthier Christ-believers (who identified themselves as wise/*sophos*) had been educated in Stoicism and viewed Paul as the founder of a new philosophical school. For them, the Spirit replaced Stoic virtue, resulting in the elevation of the spiritual over the bodily. They adhered to what Brookins names “a sub(ordinated) Stoicism,” subordinated, that is, to “Christ-faith.” In investigating his topic, Brookins returns repeatedly to his thesis and does an admirable job of making sure the reader

knows where he is.

I have four reservations about this carefully researched and written monograph:

First, clear evidence for the presence of Stoicism in Corinth in the mid-first century CE is limited and at times Brookins may overplay his hand. So, for example, in 2:16 Paul quotes Isaiah 40:13. Whereas the Hebrew text has *spirit* (*ruach*), 1 Corinthians has *mind* (*nous*). Why? *Mind* echoes Stoic thought, Brookins suggests. But *mind* (*nous*) is in the Septuagint text, which Paul is most likely using, the significance of which Brookins quickly dismisses. Related is the downplaying of the influence of popular philosophy, which was often an amalgam of Stoic and Cynic thought.

Second, while Brookins continually emphasizes the goal of exegeting 1 Corinthians 1–4, the book is heavy on complex and illuminating exegetical comments but light on full exegeses of passages. Often the entire sentence is not exegeted, and the meaning of many words is left up to the reader (good examples are *scribe* and *debater* in 1:20; *proclamation* and *proclaim* in 1:21, 23; *mystery* in 2:7; *fire* in 3:13, 15). Text criticism is also generally ignored (see 2:1 on *testimony* vs. *mystery*).

Third, to make his larger case Brookins unnecessarily pits rhetoric and philosophy against each other. The Stoics, after all, were rhetors—and so was Paul.

Fourth, almost no Greek is translated. Readers without access to Greek may find some discussions difficult to follow, which is unfortunate, given his frequent on-target theological insights and the fifteen lectionary texts from 1 Corinthians 1–4 in the Revised Common Lectionary.

Brookins’ work is a major contribution to scholarship on 1 Corinthians and the interaction of Paul with Stoicism. No study on this letter can responsibly ignore his thesis, which provides a highly plausible if not absolutely necessary reading.

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