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Book Reviews

JOHN WILLIAMSON NEVIN: AMERICAN THEOLOGIAN.
By Richard E. Wentz. New York and Oxford: Oxford
University Press. vii+ 163 pages. Cloth. \$35.00

“Although it is not easy for American intellectuals and scholars to admit it, the popular mind of America is still effectively shaped by the revivalistic Evangelical tradition of Christianity” (page 107). While Wentz is absolutely correct, the purpose of this study is to provide an in depth theological analysis of one nineteenth-century figure who strove over the course of his career to turn American theology and practice away from the influences of revivalistic Evangelicalism.

Nevin (1803-1886), a Presbyterian by birth, trained for the ministry at Princeton and taught at Western Theological Seminary (Pittsburgh) before becoming a member of the German Reformed Church. At the German Reformed seminary at Mecersburg, Pennsylvania, Nevin, along with his colleague Philip Schaff, articulated a theology completely at odds with the prevailing revivalism of the mid-nineteenth century.

How, then, can Wentz claim in the title that Nevin is an “American” theologian? Wentz states his thesis very clearly: “the life of John Williamson Nevin is shaped in response to the circumstances of American life and thought, that it represents an ever-expanding awareness that horizons are never settled boundaries, that the self is discerned as it is opened to symbols that transmit a reality ever greater than our ability to comprehend” (pages 12-13). In other words, Nevin demonstrated his Americanness precisely in his critique of America.

It was in the context of sectarian, denominational America that Nevin argued for a return to and appreciation for the catholicity of the church. In a series of eight chapters Wentz unveils the richness of Nevin’s thought step by step. The first chapter is a brief biographical treatment of Nevin, followed by examinations of his views on systematic theology, the public character of theology, catholicity, theology of history, the place of America

in the theological task, missions, and liturgical theology. A brief conclusion, which recaps the theses of the various chapters, finishes out the work. The volume is unabashedly a work of historical theology. This is not a biography of Nevin, though Wentz does not neglect important aspects of Nevin's life. The point is simply that when events do show themselves in the work, they appear in order to explain the context in which Nevin argued a theological point.

What emerges from the text are the key theological points that define John Nevin: catholicity, history, the Incarnation, and liturgy. Each is symbiotically related to the others—they all hang together. For Nevin, catholicity means that the church is not an aggregation of individuals. Rather, it “represents the universal in our midst” (page 66). Thus, the church catholic is the church of history. Nevin will have nothing of the restorationist principle that seeks to reach back over the historical church to recreate a lost “golden age.” Instead, the church has been present historically from the time of Christ to the present. Thus, catholicity assumes the Incarnation. As Nevin would say it, “The whole fact of Christianity gathers itself up fundamentally into the single person of Christ” (page 135). Finally, a christocentric theology must express itself in particular liturgical forms. There is no dichotomy of theology and praxis, of substance and style. Again, quoting Nevin, “There is a most intimate connection between the use of such a [liturgical] scheme of worship and the practical apprehension of the great facts of Christianity in their proper form” (page 133). Or as Wentz puts it, for Nevin “Liturgy is an act of asceticism that brings together the life of nature and the life of heaven. The Incarnation makes this liturgical reality possible” (page 131). Finally, “the creed is apprehended in faith, for what it sets before us of the incarnate reality of the gospel” (page 136). In the end Wentz captures beautifully Nevin's thought: “we do not believe the Church because we are convinced of the superior qualities and attributes of the empirical institution. We contemplate the Church, respond to it in faith, because it proceeds from Christ”

(page 137). To put it briefly, liturgy is the absolutely necessary expression of theology because "it is a text of words and actions that communicate the reality of the Word made flesh" (page 139).

As powerfully as Wentz captures the essence of Nevin's thought, there are points at which the book could be improved. First, at times the prose is rather tortured and obscure, as the following example makes clear: "His 'conversion' experience abstracted the inner life from its ongoing sustenance in the nurturing life of the Church" (page 14). Other examples abound. The overall effect is to make the book much more difficult to read than it need be. Nevin's concepts are demanding enough. The words and images that Wentz uses to communicate Nevin's thought to the modern reader do not always help clarify matters. In fact, at times they obfuscate the situation. The reader begins to wonder whether he is getting a fair and accurate overview of Nevin's thought, or if he is simply hearing Wentz. This is closely related to a second criticism. At times Wentz so clearly interjects his own opinions into the material as to compromise his points. For example, on page 47 he is overtly critical of Lutheranism. On page 117, after noting Nevin's appreciation for the German way of thinking, he editorializes, "One wonders what he would say of that mind and spirit from the perspective of one hundred years later." Finally, he brings in strange sources at times to help Nevin make his point (for example, Loren Eiseley's *The Star Thrower* on page 121).

That said, however, the book remains an extremely valuable contribution to Nevin scholarship. It is a tough read, indeed, but it is worth it. This is a book for the professor or dedicated graduate student. Wentz is too obtuse to make this volume accessible to any but the specialist. This is a real disappointment, for where Wentz's prose tends toward the philosophical, Nevin's has punch and directness. Even at his most obscure moments, Nevin maintains a clarity of presentation that is lost in Wentz. What would be helpful is for

Nevin's works to be more generally and easily available for the casual reader, so that the theological student of any level could approach Nevin directly. In the end it drives this reviewer to hope for a full edition of Nevin's works to be produced. After two abortive attempts (the Lancaster and Pittsburgh Series), the time is now for a full-fledged effort at making this important exponent of Reformed confessionalism available to the general theological enterprise.

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

AT THE LIGHTING OF THE LAMPS: HYMNS OF THE ANCIENT CHURCH. By John A. McGuckin. Oxford: SLG Press, 1995; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse Publishing, 1997. xvi + 102 Pages. Paper.

One of my most treasured acquisitions from the shelves of used book stores is a 1858 publication entitled *Auswahl Aitchristlicher Lieder vom zweiten bisfunfzehnten Jahrhundert*, a selection of early Christian hymns from the second to the fifteenth century by a certain Ferdinand Baessler. In 256 pages this book offers 140 hymns, giving both Greek and Latin original texts and German translation. Although much more modest in size and selection, this little selection of early Christian hymns compiled by John McGuckin is most welcome, for it makes newly accessible to the English speaking texts of ancient devotion easily lost in the present-day lust for things new. It is not the first collection of early hymnody translated into the English. J. Brownlie's *Hymns of The Early Church* (1913) is a more thorough selection, and R. M. Pope published the hymns of Prudentius (1905). Nonetheless, this little book will be a cost-effective source of Christian prayer and devotion. McGuckin offers thirty-one hymns from the Eastern and Western patristic heritage, giving both the Greek and the Latin texts along with his own translation.

McGuckin admits that the choice of hymns is a "personal selection," but one which "represents the spirit of the ancient Church." I would concur, yet a certain quibbling about the

selection is justified. Given the limited number of hymns, that five come from the New Testament seems excessive. McGuckin is surely correct in reminding us that the New Testament and the Old Testament are full of hymns and hymnic material. His choice of New Testament hymns is a good one (John 1:1-18; Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:13-20; 1 Timothy 3:16; Revelation 15:3-4), yet given the familiarity of these texts, their status as early Christian hymns could have been noted in the Introduction and their space given to lesser known patristic hymns. Secondly, the selection of Sedulius Scotus (ninth century) and of Pseudo-Synesios (tenth century), which extends beyond the patristic period seems, unjustified, again in view of the limited selection of the book. The result is that some hymn writers well within the patristic period are omitted, such as the fifth century Coelius Sedulius and Methodius. Finally, there is an evident predilection for the Byzantine tradition, with four hymns by John of Damascus chosen and a number of selections from the Byzantine liturgy. This "personal selection" may reflect the fact that McGuckin recently converted to Eastern Orthodoxy. Nonetheless, for a readership most likely Western, these hymns deserve to be known and appreciated.

Perhaps McGuckin is too optimistic, but noting that these hymns were written for open recitation, he invites the reader to read the hymns out loud. He assumes that the Latin pronunciation will be somewhat familiar. But for those who do not know Greek "it is only a few days' practice to acquire the phonetic skills that would allow oral declamation of the Eastern pieces" (page xiii). To assist in this, McGuckin gives a two-page "Pronunciation Guide to Byzantine Greek." That may be expecting too much from most readers. However, McGuckin assures us that in his translation he attempted to keep poetic license to a minimum and to render the original so as to give a "graceful and poetic English that tries to catch the spirit of the original, yet with a firm hand on textual authenticity" (page xii). He has succeeded to a remarkable degree.

William C. Weinrich

2 TIMOTHY: BE STRONG. By Irwin J. Habeck. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997. Cloth. 110 pages. \$19.99

What does the text say? How does it apply to us personally? How will it apply to our work in the pastoral ministry? Answers to these questions were the goal of the exegetical task for author Irwin J. Habeck. The outline of the book is strong in its simplicity. The theme is "Be Strong" (2 Timothy 2:1). Be strong personally (1:3-2:13) and be strong in your ministry (2:14-4:8) is St. Paul's message to his beloved Timothy.

Two marks distinguish Habeck's commentary. It is pastoral. It is practical. His pastoral heart shines through his exposition of the text of Scripture. He distinguishes between Law and Gospel, and he makes relevant application of the Word to the human soul. His practical applications are presented with a mind toward the shepherding of souls redeemed by the precious blood of Christ.

This is a conservative Lutheran biblical commentary for pastors and lay persons. The literal translation of the text conveys the flavor and emphasis of the original Greek text. The exposition discusses the meaning of words and phrases. The text is examined in the light of its historical setting and the canon of Scripture as a whole. The interpretation expounds Law and Gospel, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Word, and the mission of the Church. These are elements of a good theological commentary!

Habeck wants the reader to come to a devotional study of the pastoral epistle that encourages men today to "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:1).

The Greek text is printed for the reader's analysis, followed by the author's own literal English translation. Each passage is given theological exposition toward the end of proper interpretation of the text and also a full discovery of meaning. The author is a good model of an exegete who is pastoral.

The commentary would be improved with a fuller exposition of biblical terms, for example, mercy and peace. The author presupposes former biblical studies.

The commentary is easy to read, and the author is not given to pompous scholarship or impractical circumlocutions. He has a high view of Scripture. This book is a good resource for a Bible class on 2 Timothy. I recommend Habeck's commentary for the pastor's library. It will help in preaching on 2 Timothy texts (Lutheran Worship: 20th, 21st, 22nd, and 23rd Sundays after Pentecost [Series C], St. Luke, 18 October [3 year series and 1 year series], and St. Mark, 25 April [3 year series]; The Lutheran Hymnal: 9th Sunday after Trinity [2nd series], Sexagesima [2nd series], and Dedication [2nd series]). Hymns based on 2 Timothy texts are 166, 123, and 354 in Lutheran Worship, and 209, 381, and 599 in The Lutheran Hymnal.

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Books Received

Baumler, Gary P. *John*. The People's Bible. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997. V + 281 Pages. Paper. \$11.99.

Blomberg, Craig L. *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997. viii + 440 Pages. Cloth. \$24.99.

Campbell, Charles L. *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology*. Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 1997. xlv + 289 Pages. Paper. \$28.00.

Edwards, Paul, editor. *Immortality*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1997. viii + 337 Pages. Paper. \$19.95.

Ero, Robert B., translator. *Fulgentius: Selected Works*. The Fathers of the Church, volume 95. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997. xviii + 583 Pages. Cloth. \$39.95.

Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *The Semitic Background of the New Testament*. Combined Edition of *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament* and *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays*. The Biblical Resource Series. Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans; Livonia, Michigan: Dove Booksellers, 1997. xxi + 854 Pages. Paper. \$35.00.

Johnston, Paul I., editor. *Anthology of the Theological Writings of J. Michael Reu*. Texts and Studies in Religion, volume 71. Lewiston/Oueenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997. v + 357 Pages. Cloth. \$99.95.

Keown, Gerald L., Scalise, Pamela J., and Smothers, Thomas C. *Jeremiah 26-52*. Word Biblical Commentary, volume 27. Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1995. xxix + 402 Pages. Cloth.

Koehler, J. P., Pieper, August, Schaller, John. *The Wauwatosa Theology*. 3 volumes. Curtis A. Jahn, compiling editor. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997. 1545 Pages. Cloth.

Letis, Theodore P. *The Ecclesiastical Text: Text Criticism, Biblical Authority and the Popular Mind*. Philadelphia/Edinburgh: The Institute for Renaissance and Reformation Biblical Studies, 1997. xiii + 232 Pages. Paper.

Merdinger, J. E. *Rome and the African Church in the Time of Augustine*. NewHaven/London: Yale University Press, 1997. xvi+207 Pages. Cloth. \$40.00.

O'Meara, Thomas Franklin. *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian*. Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997. xxi + 302 Pages. Paper. \$16.95.

Panning, Armin J. *Galatians, Ephesians*. The People's Bible. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997. v + 222 Pages. Paper. \$10.99.

Schjorring, Jens Holger, and others, editors. *From Federation to Communion: The History of the Lutheran World Federation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997. xxiv + 552 Pages. Cloth. \$39.00.

Vogt, John F. *Holy Spirit: The Giver of Life*. The People's Bible. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House. 1997. 153 Pages. Paper. \$8.99.