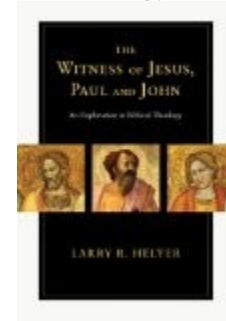


## ***The Witness of Jesus, Paul and John: An Exploration in Biblical Theology***

Author: Larry Helyer  
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My thanks go out to IVP Academic for supplying me with a review copy of this book. When I received *The Witness of Jesus, Paul and John: An Exploration in Biblical Theology* by Larry Helyer, I noticed the book looked like a college or seminary text book. After reading it, I feel like I have earned some college credits!

The book is eminently suited for a text book, because it is really a course on a Biblical Theology of the New Testament. Helyer opens the book with a question that looms large in New Testament studies today: *Is the New Testament unified in its message?* It is common for liberal or modern NT scholars to claim Paul's theology is opposed to Christ's, and John's concerns were opposed to Matthew's. In response to this problem, Larry Helyer sets out to trace the theology of Jesus, Paul and John as found in the New Testament. Then he compares each of their emphases and puts the question to rest, in my opinion. There are different emphases but the basic message of these three primary movers in the NT remains largely the same.

Along the way, Helyer explains exactly what Biblical Theology (BT) is, and he describes the problem of the overall unity of the Bible by tracing a history of theology from the time of the Apostles to today. He then moves on to discuss the two basic evangelical systems of BT, Covenant Theology (CT) and Dispensationalism. His chapter defining BT helpfully discusses how the canon shapes our BT, and provides a helpful method for doing BT. His historical sketch of how the Christian church has dealt with the unity of the Bible opened my eyes to some of the big players in Biblical scholarship of the last couple hundred years. He explained the influence of Bultman, Von Rad, Robinson and others, with particular stress on the development of BT. In his discussion of CT and dispensationalism, I was helped by his comparison of the growth and development within CT with the rise of progressive dispensationalism. He doesn't come and spell out his overall conviction in the matter, but takes care to follow the clear theological teaching of Scripture. From what I can tell he ends up more in line with the progressive dispensational or revised CT perspective.

The bulk of the book is his examination of the theology of Jesus (as seen in the Synoptic Gospels), Paul and John. This examination is strengthened by Helyer's familiarity with 2<sup>nd</sup> temple Judaism and the similarities and differences such Jewish thought has with the New Testament. Helyer also explains the theological development of various key terms as he goes along. He is abreast of the points of controversy, and he navigates them with care.

In his section on the Gospels, I found his discussion of the Kingdom extremely helpful, especially with regard to working out how the Testaments are unified. He compares the different phrases "kingdom of God", "kingdom of Heaven", etc. and convincingly demonstrates they are synonymous. The kingdom is explained in terms of inaugurated eschatology, and Jesus' use of the kingdom is shown as both similar and different from the Judaism of his day.

Helyer's discussion of Paul begins by explaining that we only have insights into Pauline theology extracted from his overall thought. Paul's letters are occasional documents, addressed to a specific church in a specific situation. After discussing the question of a center of Pauline theology, he handles the matter of justification and the new Pauline perspective quite well. He is careful to appreciate the new insights into Pauline thought, yet with his familiarity with 2<sup>nd</sup> temple Judaism he explains why he thinks the NPP goes to far in overturning Reformation thought. His discussion of Paul's view of the Law was masterful, even though he took just a couple short pages to survey Paul's view of the relationship of the believer and the law of Moses. He explains that while Jews are “under the law”, the Christian is “not under law”. The law has run its course in redemptive history. The Spirit, now, is the “moral governor of the Christian life”. “For Paul, the new covenant operates under a new law, the law of Christ, the law of love, which, while embodying underlying moral principles of the old Mosaic legislation, should not be strictly identified with it.” (pg. 266-268).

In detailing John's portrayal of Christ's person and work, Helyer takes pains to explain John is countering a proto-Gnostic error. There is a polemical thrust behind John's presentation of Christ. On the question of John's use of the term “Logos”, Helyer explains that the term has as much of an OT and 2<sup>nd</sup> temple Judaistic background as it has roots in Greek thought. In examining John's writings, the emphasis on eschatology goes up a notch, of course. Yet an already, but not yet view of the kingdom is still inherent in John's thought. Helyer's treatment of Revelation was excellent. I especially liked his chiasmic outline of the book (from pg. 353):

- A. The Inaugural Vision: The Risen and Reigning Christ (ch. 1)
- B. Messages to the Seven Churches: The Church Militant (chs. 2-3): What is the present prospect and promise for the church?
  - C. Vision of the Throne Room (chs. 4-5): Who is in charge?
    - D. Visions of the War for the Throne (chs. 6-16): The Wrath of the Lamb
      - 1. Seven Seals
      - 2. Seven Trumpets
      - 3. Seven Bowls
  - C'. Vision of Babylon the Great (chs. 17-18): Who will lose charge?
- B'. Vision of the King and His Kingdom: The Church Triumphant (chs. 19-21): What is the future prospect and fulfillment for the church?
- A'. The Final Vision: The Returning and Rewarding Christ (ch. 22)

His discussion of Rev. 20, also almost pushed me back into historic premillennialism. His exegetical treatment was clear and forceful. It forces me to go back and study that passage again in more depth.

At the end of the book, Helyer ties up the various strands of theology that Jesus (the Synoptics), John and Paul have been developing. Within the overarching and unifying theme of the Kingdom, Helyer finds a great degree of unity in this NT witness. Helyer is right to conclude by the end of his book that “enough... has been said to counteract the lopsided insistence that diversity and contradiction drown out any meaningful sense of unity and harmony.”

After sitting through Helyer's “class”, I have a greater understanding of NT theology, and biblical theology in general. If you pick up the book, you will be glad you entered his course as well.

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