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Patte, Daniel.

Discipleship According to the Sermon on the Mount: Four Legitimate Readings, Four Plausible Views of Discipleship, and Their Relative Values

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Patte's stimulating, androcritical study challenges a dominant approach of "male euro-american scholars," namely not recognizing the interested and contextual nature of interpretation. Pretending universality and objectivity, these scholars engage in one-dimensional scholarship seeking the one "right" interpretation and discrediting all others. Patte calls for the recognition that scholarship is advocacy, multi-dimensional, communal, dialogical. It should encourage others to formulate their own readings and articulate their basis and commitments. Decentering one's own reading happens as one makes explicit ("brings to consciousness") interpretive processes and choices, recognizes that reading is impacted by particular interests and formulated in culturally conditioned conceptualizations, and acknowledges that it exists alongside other readings that are legitimate (textually supportable), plausible (makes sense for this cultural context), and valuable (for my and/or others' way of life).

None of this is new, even if "male euro-american scholars" have not always welcomed such observations. But Patte takes it further by exemplifying his challenge in a discussion of four types of recent readings of the Sermon on the Mount, those of G. Strecker and J. D. Kingsbury, R. A. Edwards, U. Luz and W. D. Davies and D. Allison, and Patte's own work.

Patte develops his argument in seven chapters. In chapter one he sustains the claim that plural readings can be legitimate and plausible, while being of different values or significance for readers in particular cultural contexts.

In chapter 2 he illustrates problems with the quest for one universal meaning by discussing four readings of Matthew 4:18-22. Reading A, the Strecker/Kingsbury "historical" approach, "finds the coherence of the text in the situation(s) to which the text refers." Edwards's "narrative" approach (Reading B) finds coherence "in the unfolding of the plot of the story." Both understand discipleship as the implementation of beliefs. Luz

and Davies and Allison (C) take a "figurative" approach, finding coherence "among its figures, symbolic expressions, and metaphors." Patte's "thematic" reading (D) seeks coherence among the text's "themes, convictional expressions and semantic trajectories." Readings C and D understand discipleship as intuitive ethical practice or imitation (p. 63). Patte finds all four readings legitimate and plausible. He argues, though, that they fail to be truly critical in not recognizing other legitimate options, and in not pursuing the issue of value.

After 121 pages, surprisingly, Part 1 begins. In its two chapters Patte establishes the legitimacy of Readings A and B (chapter 3) and of C and D (chapter 4). He argues that Reading A understands the Sermon to reveal God's eternal will to be implemented in the church, Reading B views the Sermon as inviting novice disciples to become full disciples, Reading C presents the Sermon as offering a vision of life in the reign of God (present and future), and Reading D identifies moral discernment as the essential characteristic of its discipleship.

Part 2, also comprising two chapters, establishes the plausibility of these readings. Patte argues that each reading chooses aspects of the text that make sense to the interpreter. His task is to make explicit the Euro-American categories informing these interpreters. He argues (chapter 5) that Reading A employs a deontological preunderstanding of the moral life (knowing universal principles) and Reading B a consequentialist or teleological preunderstanding (empowering discipleship through motivations and rewards). In chapter 6 Reading C uses a perfectionist preunderstanding comprising resocialization in the symbolic world or vision of the Sermon. Reading D employs a different perfectionist preunderstanding, emphasizing moral discernment or character formation through imitating models of righteousness.

Chapter 7 pursues the issue of value typically neglected by scholars. While the four readings are legitimate (have textual support) and plausible (make sense for readers in a cultural context), they are not equally valuable. Patte assesses each reading's value, carefully emphasizing that he is not searching for the right or universal meaning. For him Reading A is dangerous because it subordinates the individual to the community. Reading B is dangerous because it unconvincingly claims that while God's will is known, people lack the will to do it. Reading C is dangerous because it repeats Reading A's mistake. For Patte Reading D is most valuable because it recognizes that God's will and reign might be discerned anywhere, not just within a particular community.

This book is rich in its hermeneutical work and perceptive in its analysis of study of the Sermon. Readers should be willing, however, to negotiate their way through numerous abbreviations, much repetition, statements and interpretations of intent, technical jargon, summaries, different types of print, authorial introspection and self-critique (e.g. p. 89, n. 67; pp. 194-98), and a choppy structure as Patte works with the four readings. Patte hopes

that the book will impact what happens in pulpits. Amen to that, but the book is simply too difficult for many who occupy contemporary pulpits.

Regrettably H. D. Betz's work, even the pre-commentary essays, figures little. The classifications of four readings are very helpful yet are not always adequate (as Patte admits, e.g. pp. 229-30, 313-14). Styling Strecker and Kingsbury, but not Luz and Davies and Allison, as "historical," and the latter as "figurative," too easily passes over the redaction-critical approach all employ. The scholarly basis for Reading B is thin. The consideration of its plausibility as a consequentialist reading lacks reference to scholarly discussion (pp. 278-311) and seems to comprise Patte's elaboration. Clearly no reading is as monolithic as Patte's categories suggest. That applies also to the preunderstandings of the moral life identified in chapters 6-7. While the categories are neat, the data are more messy. More seriously, when Patte identifies in chapters 5-6 the preunderstandings impacting the four readings, he does so only in terms of intellectual moral constructs, not in terms of the personal experiences and socio-cultural contexts of the scholars. While feminist, womanist, and liberation scholars, for instance, readily identify the impact of such settings, are "male euro- american scholars" exempt from all but intellectual forces?

Yet throughout this insightful book, Patte rightly offers an important challenge to "male euro-american scholars" to engage in truly critical work, making choices and assumptions explicit, recognizing commitments and context, and not claiming universality or monolithicity. And in a context of multi- dimensional work, and with other voices making similar pleas, he wisely and passionately urges these scholars to consider the value of their readings, their implications for how people live.