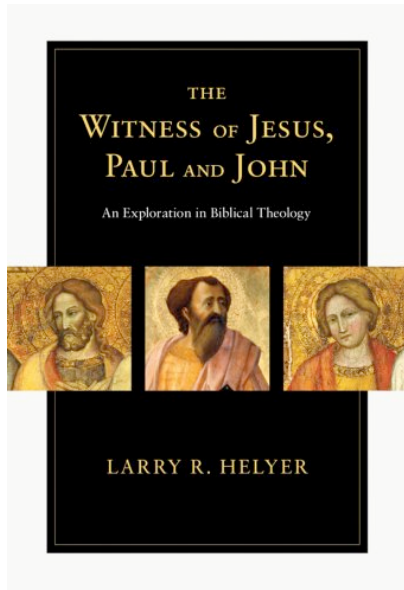


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Helyer, Larry R.

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

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Larry Helyer has taught an undergraduate biblical theology course for over twenty-five years as professor of biblical studies at Taylor University in Upland, Indiana. The “field-tested” result is this attempt to summarize the “essential message” of the New Testament through the three most prominent contributors: “If you have a basic understanding of Jesus, Paul, and John, you have the heart of the New Testament message” (13). From the outset, Helyer clearly identifies his objective (summarize the core New Testament message), his audience (undergraduates at least open to evangelical theology), and his presuppositions (“the historic Christian faith based upon the Bible and summarized in the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed” [15]). Helyer unashamedly confesses his allegiance to the basic tenets of evangelical biblical theology, including the existence of God, the infallibly inspired Protestant canon, and the existence of a unified biblical message.

After professing his own hermeneutical context, Helyer proceeds in part 1 of the book’s five sections to define the task (ch. 1). Evangelical theological method is canonical, descriptive, and historical. It seeks to glean the Bible’s basic theological teachings, summarize them, and present them synthetically and systematically. Helyer further describes an evangelical methodology that begins with (1) grammatical-historical-theological exegesis in search of authorial intent culminating in (2) a synthesis of the

text's theological affirmations. The ultimate goal of biblical theology is to glorify God through the proclamation and obedient application of the synthesized message.

Rather than survey the history of biblical theology as others have done, Helyer devotes chapter 2 to a historical survey of perhaps the most controversial issue in the discipline: Does the canon evidence a genuinely unified message? According to Helyer, affirmations or denials of theological unity hinge on the interpreter's view of the interrelationship between the New Testament and the Old Testament. As a result, the chapter is actually a survey of historical theology and how, from the apostolic period to the present, interpreters have dealt with the texts, their intertextual relationships, and their historical contexts.

Until the age of reason, although many differed on the details, exegetes generally assumed that the canon contained a core message. The New Testament documents themselves illustrate the earliest church's promise-fulfillment hermeneutic. The historical person and work of Jesus of Nazareth are the interpretive keys to the Old Testament and history itself. Later allegorists began to separate theology from history, until the Reformers attempted to refocus on authorial intent and propose christological principles (Luther) or covenant administrations (Calvin) as organizing centers. From the age of reason to the present, skeptical critics have advanced various ahistorical interpretations of biblical "salvation history" (Bultmann, von Rod, the New Hermeneutic), but Helyer concludes in the end that Cullmann's salvation in history approach and B. S. Childs's canonical criticism have offered paradigms that are more faithful to the texts, history, and evangelical presuppositions.

Chapter 3's evaluation of dispensationalism and covenant theology is an attempt to mediate between the two most influential evangelical "systems" of biblical theology. Despite strengths and weaknesses on both sides, Helyer contends that each has tended to favor systemic consistency and rigidity over exegetical accuracy. He proposes instead the kingdom of God as the key unifying concept: "In short, the idea of the kingdom of God frames the entire corpus of Scripture." (130)

Part 2, "The Theology of Jesus," explores Jesus' view of the kingdom (ch. 4) and his ethical teachings (ch. 5). After defining God's kingdom as his dynamic "sovereign rule over all creation" (127), Helyer surveys the standard noneschatological (von Harnack), apocalyptic (Schweitzer), and realized eschatology (Dodd) interpretations of Jesus' kingdom theology. In the end, he defends the "now but not yet" inaugurated view popularized by Cullmann, Ladd, and others as the "master key" for understanding Jesus' perspective. Helyer further explicates Jesus' kingdom concepts by summarizing key points from the parables in Matt 13. Despite bypassing some of the knottier questions of

parabolic purpose, his lucid descriptions through these “windows” help clarify the nature of the kingdom and the God who rules it.

The chapter on Jesus’ ethics is essentially an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7). Helyer argues that the “sermon” is probably an edited collection of sayings delivered on various occasions and condensed here into a digest addressed directly to those already committed to discipleship. It is therefore primarily didactic rather than kerygmatic (evangelistic). At this point his exegesis seems slightly inconsistent. In order to deal with the “two ways” exhortations (Matt 7:13–27), Helyer suggests that at this point in Jesus’ message unbelievers must have joined the listening disciples. If the Matthean sermon is a collection of traditions, is it also a singular historical event attended by disciples and the uncommitted? Helyer provides no clarifying explanation for the connections. After surveying various interpretive grids used throughout history to apply the sermon, he concludes that the “now but not yet” paradigm remains the “master key” for comprehending Jesus’ ethical expectations. Jesus’ extremely demanding new righteousness transcends Pharisaic externals in the interim and will be fully realized among his disciples at the parousia.

Part 3, “The Theology of Paul,” is the longest and most complex section. Helyer admirably surveys critical problems in the history of Pauline research (ch. 6), briefly describes Paul’s sociocultural context, and decides that the “center” of Paul’s theology is something like a cluster of christological convictions developed out of his Damascus road experience. Jesus of Nazareth is the living exalted Lord of all creation, his crucifixion for sinners is the climax of redemptive history, and he saves and indwells sinners who have been reconciled to him by the free exercise of his own grace.

Helyer explores “Paul’s Gospel” (ch. 7) in terms of (1) humanity’s sinful condition apart from Christ and (2) God’s redemptive solution through Christ. All people are individually guilty, are sinners by original guilt, and are accountable for Adam’s sin by imputation. Paul’s doctrine of salvation, however, incorporates various metaphors that demonstrate the comprehensive cure procured through a single key event cluster: Jesus Christ’s crucifixion, resurrection, and exaltation. Salvation is a multilayered reality described variously as sacrifice, redemption, reconciliation, cosmic victory over evil, and justification. Regarding justification in particular, Helyer does not avoid the extremely complicated academic debates swirling around Paul, the law, and the nature of God’s righteousness. For the uninitiated, however, Helyer’s treatment will likely prove opaque. His two-page summary of the so-called New Perspective is perhaps overly condensed. His own apparent inconsistency is also somewhat confusing. Although he agrees with E. P. Sanders that first-century Judaism must not be read as a religion of works, he later cites evidence of “nomistic legalism” throughout Second Temple literature. In the end, it is

difficult to decipher what he actually accepts or rejects from the theses of Sanders, Dunn, and Wright. As a result of revelatory experiences and his own biblical theology, Paul was convinced that Jesus was the Creator incarnate who would return personally and historically to inaugurate his righteous rule (ch. 8).

Part 4, “The Theology of John,” examines Johannine Christology (ch. 9), eschatology, and ecclesiology (ch. 10). Helyer acknowledges the authorship problem in critical studies of the Johannine corpus but opts for the traditional view that John the son of Zebedee was responsible for the Fourth Gospel, 1–3 John, and Revelation. The discussion of Jesus’ person depends primarily on the Gospel and surveys standard discussions of incipient Gnosticism, christological titles, and the atonement. For John’s eschatology and ecclesiology, Helyer attempts to canvass each section of the corpus (Fourth Gospel, epistles, Revelation). He concludes that, although John uses different terminology, he faithfully adheres to the already–not yet kingdom of God paradigm. The book of Revelation is primarily futurist, and the millennial kingdom will be a literal temporary messianic rule preceding the complete cosmic renewal.

The short ecclesiology section seems a bit underdeveloped, focusing on a few of John’s community metaphors, such as the community of light, the flock of God, and the true vine. A five-page discussion of the Holy Spirit is appended here under the ecclesiology rubric, almost as an afterthought.

Part 5, “Three Witnesses, One Message,” is a one-chapter concluding summary of the unified message shared by Jesus, Paul, and John. The central kingdom of God theme, structured along salvation-historical lines, oscillates around Christ and his atoning work. All three witnesses testify to God’s redemptive plan for fallen humanity and the cosmos.

Readers more persuaded by historical-critical skepticism or more interested in the latest speculative trends will probably want to look elsewhere. By contrast, true to Helyer’s stated purpose, the book provides a solid textbook level introduction to major themes and critical issues in New Testament theology for undergraduates, pastors, and laypersons willing to engage evangelical perspectives. Each chapter is well documented, mostly with the publisher’s own line of reference materials, and concludes with discussion questions and generous bibliographies. Helyer sprinkles his discussions with practical advice for evangelical Bible students and teachers designed both to strengthen personal faith and to encourage a flowering of biblical knowledge and application.