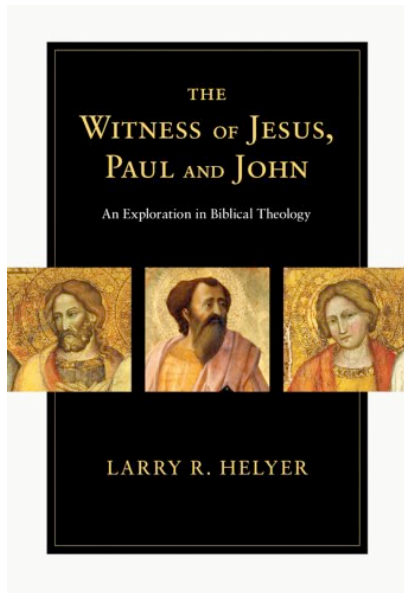


RBL 01/2010



**Helyer, Larry R.**

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

Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2008. Pp. 432.  
Hardcover. \$32.00. ISBN 0830828885.

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In his preface Larry Helyer mentions that the impetus for this book comes from the classroom. As I have just taught a course on biblical theology, I read this book with great interest. Helyer mentions his desire to accomplish five primary objectives: to introduce evangelical college and seminary students as well as general readers to biblical theology; to underline the significance of biblical theology for spiritual maturity; to assist evangelical Christians in locating themselves within the broader enterprise of biblical studies and to introduce them to the unity of the Bible; to give an overview of the message of Jesus, Paul and John, focused primarily on Christology, soteriology, and eschatology; and to demonstrate that the coming of the kingdom of God is the “overarching theme” of the Bible—from Genesis to Revelation (14).

The book consists of five sections: “The Discipline of Biblical Theology”; “The Theology of Jesus”; “The Theology of Paul”; “The Theology of John”; and “Three Witnesses, One Message.” The author’s style is clear and accessible; he is well-informed and introduces his readers to the relevant scholarly literature. Viewed from an evangelical perspective, Helyer observes that the definition of biblical theology incorporates the following dimensions: biblical theology is “canonical in scope”; biblical theology is “descriptive and historical” as it investigates “the progressive unfolding of God’s revelation through time

and space”; biblical theology gives an overview of what the Bible teaches concerning God, human beings, sin, salvation, ethics and final destiny and is thus theological; the foundation of biblical theology is the exegesis of Scripture, and it uses the categories found in the biblical texts; and biblical theology is “*synthetic* and *systematic*” as it points to “central or controlling ideas that give coherence to all the other ideas” (21–22).

Evangelical biblical theology assumes the existence of God, his revelation in Scripture, and the essential unity of the message of Scripture. Biblical theology is normative, as it accepts Scripture as the rule of faith and practice. Furthermore, biblical theology is the culmination of exegetical theology and, as Gerhard Hasel has said, takes its place as the crown of biblical studies (23). Helyer formulates the goal of biblical theology in the following way: “As such, biblical theology provides data for the systematic theologian who can then reformulate this material in terms of logical, philosophical, and contemporary categories and concerns. Biblical theology thus serves as a bridge between both systematic and practical theology. Good preaching should reflect the fruit of biblical theology” (26).

Helyer does a good job of succinctly formulating the history of the scholarly debate, one example of which is his discussion of the problem of the unity of the Bible in chapter 2, where Helyer introduces readers to the most important voices of the apostolic era, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and modernity. His discussion of the contributions of Rudolf Bultmann, Gerhard von Rad, James Robinson, and Oscar Cullmann (63–76) are especially helpful.

In reflecting on the unity of the Bible, Helyer discusses two influential systems: covenant theology and dispensationalism. Although the covenant concept is important in Calvin’s theology, covenant theology, or “federal theology,” is a post-Calvin development starting with Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575). Calvin’s students Ursinus and Olevianus advanced beyond their teacher by introducing the concepts of a prefall covenant of works and a pretemporal covenant of redemption. Covenant theology structured salvation around three covenants: redemption, works, and grace.

Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669) is regarded as the father of federal theology. He wanted to soften Calvin’s view of predestination and pointed out that “God graciously abrogated the covenant of works with its federal head, Adam—and its inevitable curse—by providing in the covenant of grace a new relationship with a new federal head, Jesus” (87). Helyer reminds us that theology is never done in a vacuum. In the transition from feudalism to a constitutional monarchy, from fixed status to contract in the late Renaissance, covenant theology was developed.

In the light of new insights into Scripture and new cultural contexts, covenant theology has been developed and refined. Especially the concept of a covenant of works has fallen into disrepute. Instead, Karl Barth speaks of “one, all-embracing covenant of grace beginning at creation” (96). In contrast to the classic Protestant law/grace antithesis, Karl Barth emphasizes the overwhelming significance of grace.

Helyer begins Part 2 (“The Theology of Jesus”) with the question whether a theology of Jesus can be extracted from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke). Up to the Enlightenment few people challenged the reliability of the Gospels. Since then many New Testament scholars have come to agree with Rudolf Bultmann that the Gospels consist of three strands: old tradition; ideas produced in and by the church; and editorial work of the Evangelists. Various methodologies and criteria have been developed to reach the so-called “historical Jesus.”

In contrast to this approach, Helyer emphasizes the reliability and historicity of the canonical Gospels. He quotes Leon Morris: “I propose to take the Gospels as giving us essentially what Jesus said and did.... My concern is with the theology of the Gospels as they stand, not with the hypothetical steps by which they reached their present form” (124–25).

The center of Jesus’ message deals with the kingdom of God. This is already clear from the abundant usage of kingdom language in the Synoptic Gospels. With kingdom language, the Evangelists emphasize the rule and reign of God. Helyer discusses the different interpretations of the kingdom of God in detail (130–59).

Before proceeding to an investigation of Paul’s theology, Helyer analyzes the sources to be used. He discusses three views on the authenticity of Paul’s letters: the traditional view; the consensus critical view; and the moderately critical view (see the table on 200). He opts for the traditional view, which includes the Pastoral Epistles. In this way, “a more full-orbed theology is possible than is the case with the critical consensus of only seven genuine letters” (204). He also values the historicity of Acts and considers it a valuable supplement to Paul’s letters.

The final witness to a theology of the New Testament in Helyer’s exploration in biblical theology is constituted by the documents traditionally ascribed to the apostle John: the Gospel of John; 1–3 John; and Revelation. Despite the arguments raised by modern critical scholarship, Helyer points out that both internal and external evidence affirm the authorship of John the apostle.

Helyer concludes his book by emphasizing the profound coherence in the message of these three witnesses (Jesus, Paul, and John). The coming of the kingdom of God unifies these witnesses, as well as the whole biblical message from Genesis to Revelation. Due to the circumstantial nature of Paul's letters, the phrase "kingdom of God" appears relatively seldom. Kingdom theology surfaces, however, at crucial points where Paul applies his theological convictions to specific circumstances. These passages reveal Paul's indebtedness to Jesus' message of the coming kingdom of God. Leading up to the majestic confession of Col 1:15–20, Paul affirms in 1:13–14: "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the *kingdom of the Son he loves*, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." In giving his readers direction in the midst of dietary and calendrical disputes, Paul asserts that "the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17). In the Gospel of John the presence of God's kingdom is portrayed through metaphors such as light, truth, love, and especially life (383). Helyer observes: "Taking up the OT teaching about the kingdom of God and fundamentally redefining it, Jesus produces 'new wine in new wineskins.' Paul and John simply elaborate what is found in Jesus" (383). Additional to this unifying theme, the unity between the witnesses can also be found in a unifying structure, a shared focal point, and a unified description of the human plight. All three witnesses affirm the creation of a new covenant and new community—the new people of God. The fundamental unity among these three major witnesses can finally be demonstrated in their shared vision of the climax of the kingdom of God. This is, says Helyer, "because Paul and John, theologians in their own right, elaborate Jesus' eschatological teaching" (397).

The different voices constituting a theology of the Bible can, therefore, be compared to a symphony. "The divine conductor, the Holy Spirit, has orchestrated a most remarkable composition. In these '27 documents that changed the world' we hear the Master's voice" (403).

In the preface to this contribution to biblical theology, Helyer remarks that the material of this book has been field-tested in his classes at Taylor University. I am convinced that this book will be a valuable resource in many classes throughout the United States and the broader English-speaking world.