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Liberating Words, Rollin Ramsaran

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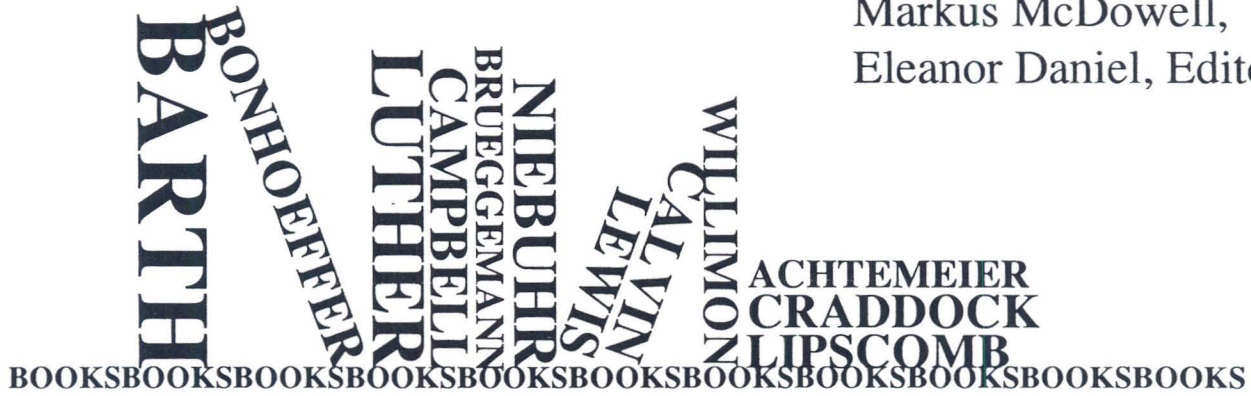
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Book Reviews

Markus McDowell,
Eleanor Daniel, Editors



Thomas H. Olbricht, *Hearing God's Voice: My Life with Scripture in the Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1996), 447 pages. Reviewed by Douglas A. Foster.

Tom Olbricht has helped shape the thinking of thousands of leaders in Churches of Christ in his long and active career as minister and teacher. In this intensely personal account of his developing understanding of the nature of Scripture, O. provides an "autobiographical hermeneutic" as he unfolds the story of his fruitful career. In a style reminiscent of Reinhold Niebuhr's *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, O. conveys profound theological insights through accounts of his own life experiences.

The author immediately makes it clear that he felt neither the desire nor the capability of producing a traditional hermeneutics textbook. This is, rather, narrative theology. In eleven chapters O. proceeds chronologically through his personal story, focusing in each phase on the ways he and those around him have interpreted and acted upon Scripture. He sets the stage for his narrative in the introduction with the principle that interpretation must begin with a biblical understanding of God. "If we interpret the Bible properly we do not come face to face with a sure-fire scheme. We come face to face with the living God, through Christ his Son and the Holy Spirit" (11).

The rest of the book is O.'s account of trying to do just that in the struggles of a Christian life.

His first impressions of the Bible were as a handbook of puzzles to be solved, a book of facts and rules, and a constitution for the church and morality. Yet he recalls that his mother conveyed to him the concept of the Bible as story, "more to do with the replication of the lives of those whose stories are told than with argument over words and doctrines" (33). Not until later would he weigh the implications of those contrasting ideas.

Embedded in the historical details of his life are numerous valuable gems of insight. Here are a few. While defining hermeneutics early in the book as "perspectives and commitments from which believers put questions to the Scriptures in order to determine how to hear the voice of the living God and live accordingly" (16), he admits later that "in the final analysis, the most important questions are those the Scriptures put to us" (150). The importance of the concrete needs and circumstances of the hearers must never cause the interpreter to sidetrack the Bible's own questions.

Concerning the anti-intellectual tendency still present in many of our churches, O. remarks, "It is one thing to do the best one can with the training and light God has provided in order to answer to God for oneself. It is another to display the shingle of 'God's Official Interpreter' without proper training and tools" (203). In a consider-

ation of preaching approaches, he concludes that “[l]iving under the judgment of the Word is much more likely to happen in textual preaching” than in topical (231). In chapter 9, titled “The Heart of the Scriptures,” O. speaks of the command/example/inference approach to interpretation and asserts that “[w]hen our hermeneutic is biblical, our inferences focus precisely upon ways in which the actions of Christ inform our actions” (352).

In chapter 10, O. summarizes the results of his study in a seven-part approach to interpreting a scripture. He cautions that the list will appear abstract out of the context of the previous chapters, then proceeds to apply the method to two very specific situations. The first deals with questions of worship that arose in the Minter Lane Church of Christ in Abilene; the second, with issues surrounding the role of women in the Malibu congregation. O. has served both churches as elder.

As he unfolds his personal story, O. also provides valuable insight into the historical sources of hermeneutical positions held by Churches of Christ. Particularly helpful are discussions of our Puritan intellectual roots in chapter 2, the origins of the command/example/inference hermeneutic in chapter 3, Alexander Campbell’s interpretive understandings in chapter 4, and the hermeneutical ideas of fourth-century church father Basil the Great in chapter 6.

The maxims and historical data emerge only in the context of O.’s specific story. Detached from that story, they would have much less impact on the reader. I must admit that at times I found it difficult to see the relevance of all the details O. relates. Furthermore, he is surprisingly frank in his evaluations of the work of others with whom he had contact through the years. He himself acknowledges the seeming irrelevancy of much of the story to the matter of hermeneutics. But he explains that his point was to show that his perspectives are not the product of unconnected theoretical scholarship, but the result of years of working with specific congregations and with Churches of Christ throughout the world.

The particularity of O.’s story is both its greatest weakness and its greatest strength. The specific people and events detailed will most interest readers acquainted with those individuals and happenings. Yet only in the particularities of a specific life can one find universals. O.’s story, while unique in its particulars, is universal. Not necessarily that everyone will reach identical conclusions and understandings. But in Churches of Christ and other bodies

that have tended to encase Scripture in rather narrow bounds, this story of the growing realization of the full significance and power of God’s written Word in the life of one believer will be the story of many.

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James Thompson, *Equipped for Change: Studies in the Pastoral Epistles* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1996). Reviewed by Ira J. Jolivet, Jr.

As its title suggests, *Equipped for Change* is addressed to churches in transition. More specifically, the book is intended to assist congregations of the Churches of Christ in their efforts to make the appropriate changes necessary for survival while at the same time remaining faithful to the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith. The author, James Thompson, sees the Pastoral Epistles as potentially beneficial in these efforts because the churches to which Timothy and Titus ministered were also in a transitional state due to the imminent death of the apostle Paul.

The primary threat that Paul anticipated and sought to counteract was the activity of false teachers, which, if left unchallenged and uncorrected, would have had disastrous effects on the churches and on the lives of the individual members of which they were composed. As a remedy for the moral diseases produced by false teaching, Paul instructed Timothy and Titus to administer “sound doctrine.” The content of this healthy doctrine was not, as some have taught, a body of legalistic dogma, but rather “the central Christian convictions of the saving significance of the cross of Christ” (11). And unlike false teaching, which ultimately destroys human relationships and corrupts minds and souls, sound doctrine has as its goal “love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5). Since sound doctrine produces moral lives, Timothy and Titus were not only to be concerned with the pedagogical aspects of their teaching, but to be models of its end products as well.

Paul also cautioned the young evangelists to treat the core message of the gospel as a valuable deposit that had been placed in their hands for safekeeping. They were not,

however, to lock this deposit in a vault somewhere, but were to entrust it to the elders of the churches who had proven themselves to be faithful and who were also morally qualified and capable of teaching the doctrine to others. The therapeutic effects of this health-producing doctrine would be seen not only in the moral lives of the individual believers, but in the corporate lives of the churches as well. The primary focus of the public assemblies, for example, would be to reflect an understanding of the significance of the cross of Christ through praise offered to God for his gracious act of salvation. While worship was for and directed to God, the larger communities in which the churches existed would observe that Christians were not social deviants or troublemakers and that salvation was for all people.

Congregations today feel threatened when they perceive that they are losing the battle for the public's attention—and that of their own members—to more dynamic and culturally attuned competitors such as television, movies, and sports and entertainment events. The tendency is for these congregations to adopt the tactics of the perceived winners. But, according to T., the churches would be better served by heeding Paul's instructions to Timothy and Titus in the Pastorals.

With regard to the deposit of sound doctrine, churches must realize that they exist only because throughout the centuries, faithful individuals have passed on the central convictions of the faith from generation to generation. The churches' primary responsibility, therefore, is to safeguard this deposit and ensure that it is transmitted to the succeeding generation. Consequently, they must select leaders who understand that they are to be, above all else, faithful stewards of the central convictions of the faith. Pulpit ministers must not be chosen simply because they are excellent communicators or public relations experts, but because they are committed to and have a passion for the truth of the gospel. Elders likewise must be selected for moral excellence and teaching ability rather than for organizational expertise and decision-making skills.

The significance of the responsibilities of church leaders as faithful stewards of the deposit of sound doctrine cannot be overemphasized, because it is as essential to the moral development of the Christians of today as it was to that of the members of the churches to which Timothy and Titus ministered. As T. states: "We cannot learn to live as Christians, and we cannot develop the right habits unless our minds are oriented to the basic Christian story. Published by Pepperdine Digital Commons, 1997

One cannot teach ethics properly without this Christian story, and one cannot preach this story without insisting that it calls for a response" (103). Furthermore, the story of the cross provides a focus for the public assembly, because here "the church recalls God's mission in this world: the salvation of all people through Jesus Christ" (37).

Equipped for Change is a book for congregations of the Churches of Christ. While T. backs his analysis and conclusions with his usual solid biblical exegetical expertise, he neither speaks above the heads of nor down to his intended audience. Transliterated Greek terms are used sparingly and only when they shed significant light on the subject matter being discussed. The book's length (147 pages) and organization into thirteen relatively short chapters with provocative concluding questions for discussion make it especially suitable for use in adult Bible classes. Because its author brings keen biblical insights to bear upon critical issues regarding the survival of the church, however, *Equipped for Change* should also be considered for careful study by elders, ministers, and others in leadership positions in congregations; by congregational committees charged with the responsibility of searching for and interviewing prospective ministers; by lecturership organizers who are seeking relevant and compelling topics for discussion; and by individual members who are concerned about the present and the future of the Churches of Christ.

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Rollin A. Ramsaran, *Liberating Words: Paul's Use of Rhetorical Maxims in 1 Corinthians 1–10* (Trinity Press International: Valley Forge, 1996), 168 pages including endnotes, appendixes, and indexes. Reviewed by Markus McDowell.

Rollin Ramsaran invites his readers to explore the meaning of 1 Corinthians 1–10 by examining Paul's use of ancient rhetorical maxims. R.'s self-defined purpose is threefold: to examine the "diverse and dynamic social sphere out of which maxim usage emerged and coalesced at Paul's time" (2); to suggest a methodology for identifying Pauline maxims in 1 Corinthians; and to elaborate how "Greco-Roman rhetorical conventions concerning the maxim undergird Paul's argumentation" (2). Each purpose constitutes one of the three main chapters of the book. 3

A brief introduction elucidates the background, purpose, and methodology of the study. Chapter 1, "Maxims in Paul's World," examines the prominent use of maxims in primary, secondary, and home education of the ancient world. Based on Quintilian's *Institutio Oratio* from the first century C.E., R. examines the forms and uses of maxims in Paul's world and analyzes three classes of maxims: the gnomic maxim, the gnomic sentence, and the moral *sententia*. The chapter concludes with a further look at the use and effectiveness of these maxims in terms of speaker, audience, expressive techniques, and elaboration. R. presents important groundwork for the remaining two chapters, although the casual reader who is not familiar with ancient rhetorical studies may find some of the terminology and references a bit confusing.

In chapter 2, "Identifying Paul's Maxims and Reading Them within a Rhetorical Context," R. notes that ancient writers "neither regularly cited their sources nor prefaced their created wisdom" (22). A methodology is needed to identify maxims in Pauline material. "Identifying Paul's maxims is complicated because Paul constructs 'embedded' maxims from both the broader Greco-Roman traditions and those traditions more specific to the nascent believing community" (26). Nevertheless, R. believes that such a study can be fruitful, and he agrees with a growing number of modern scholars that the customs, techniques, and practices of rhetoric were pervasive through all levels of society. R. subsequently proposes guidelines for identifying maxims by employing rhetorical criticism and taking seriously the author's intent and the recipient's response. R. plausibly suggests that the "rhetorical species of 1 Corinthians is deliberative oratory within an epistolary framework" (27). The Corinthians valued moral wisdom couched in rhetoric and employed maxims as a means of communication and persuasion. By examining the text for certain indicators, one can determine how Paul employed maxims. General indicators consist of traditional moral content, brevity or conciseness, and a figured form. In addition, each of the three classes of maxims have their own characteristics.

Chapter 3, "The Function of Maxims in Paul's Argumentation: 1 Corinthians 1–10," is the largest part of this book. Using the background and methodology presented in the previous two chapters, R. examines three major sections of 1 Corinthians 1–10. In each, R. identifies the maxims in the selected passage, discusses each maxim in context, and examines how the maxim functions in fur-

thering the larger argument of 1 Corinthians 1–10. The first selected text is 1 Corinthians 1–4, which deals with conflict and division within the Corinthian community. R. sees four factors that influenced the rhetorical structure of 1 Corinthians. (Although R. says there are three [30], he actually lists four [30–31].) First, Paul uses the rhetorical technique of "covert allusion" in order to correct the readers without referring to them directly. Second, he employs examples that the Corinthians are invited to imitate. Third, he shows the incompatibility of the gospel with conventional rhetorical wisdom. Finally, Paul uses maxims in 1:10, 1:31, and 3:21–23. R. examines each of the latter passages and then summarizes his argument as it pertains to the rhetorical situation in 1 Corinthians 1–4.

The next text is 1 Corinthians 7, where R. identifies a number of maxims coming from Paul and/or the Corinthians. In R.'s view, Paul responds to the Corinthians in 7:25–26 with a maxim rather than an "opinion" (as in many translations). This is a convincing point and has important ramifications for interpretation. R. examines maxims employed throughout 1 Corinthians 7 and convincingly shows that Paul does not reject the Corinthian maxim (for that is not how one disagreed with maxims in that world), but Paul rather suggests the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the maxim. Paul is "refining the maxim usage with reasons and illustrations" (45) and may even suggest a more suitable maxim.

The final text R. examines is 1 Corinthians 8–10, which concerns the subject of meat sacrificed to idols. Following his previous methodology, R. examines Paul's maxim usage and argumentation in light of the overall argument. R. again shows how Paul employs the three classes of maxims in order to redefine or extend a Corinthian maxim (8:1–13), how Paul uses maxims to establish Christian responsibility in areas of freedom and self-control (9:1–27), and how Paul refines a Corinthian maxim on freedom (10:23–11:1).

In this important chapter, one might be tempted to criticize R. for his conclusions at the end of each section. In these conclusions, he scarcely discusses the function and use of the maxims he has identified and examined. Instead, he focuses on Paul's overall argument and the exegetical meaning of the passage. Yet this is appropriate for two reasons. First, R. has already done the necessary work in showing the use and function of the maxims themselves. Second, and more important, maxims (and indeed any rhetorical device or structure) only function to per-

suade, argue, or defend. Techniques do not stand alone as ends unto themselves. Thus, R. has studied the use of rhetorical maxim usage in order to understand Paul's arguments, resulting in a study that is fruitful on a number of academic and church-related (pastoral) levels.

Ramsaran concludes his work with a chapter that summarizes concisely the main three chapters. It includes a discussion of Paul's moral reasoning and modern communities, emphasizing R.'s interest in *meaning* and not mere facts about ancient rhetorical techniques.

The book is quite short (80 pages of body text), and since it contains promising material, one wishes that R. had examined the remaining chapters of 1 Corinthians. In addition, there is little or no mention of Jewish background or sources pertaining to Paul's use of concise moral sayings. It appears that this study is based on a Ph.D. dissertation, which would legitimately account for its narrow

focus. The book also contains two helpful appendixes: first, a summary and critique of other similar studies; and second, a brief guide to reading ancient rhetorical handbooks. The book uses endnotes rather than footnotes, which is always cumbersome for a serious reader.

Ramsaran has written a convincing and helpful book on Paul's use of rhetorical maxims. The attention to the historical and social setting in terms of rhetoric is excellent. Despite the brevity of the book, R.'s interest in elucidating the meaning of Paul's overall argument will prove helpful to those who are teaching and preaching from 1 Corinthians.

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