



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 7 • Number 3 • SUMMER 1998

BOOK REVIEWS

THE GAGGING OF GOD: CHRISTIANITY CONFRONTS PLURALISM

D. A. Carson

Grand Rapids: Zondervan (1996).

640 pages, cloth, \$27.99.

There it was, on the shelf in a local Christian bookstore. Both the cover art and the title grabbed by attention. This looked like something a well-read pastor should have. I left the store with a diminished book allowance and the hope of increased understanding. I was not disappointed (with the latter). Nothing since my reading of Francis Schaeffer's works several years ago has been more enlightening of culture, and the believer's place in it, than this volume. The author states his goal in the preface:

If anything in the following pages equips some Christians to intelligent, culturally sensitive, and passionate fidelity to the gospel of Jesus Christ, or if it encourages some thoughtful unbelievers to examine the foundations again and so to find that Jesus is Lord, I shall be profoundly grateful (p. 10).

Dr. Don Carson, professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, starts with definitions. He sees three categories of pluralism: empirical, cherished, and philosophical or hermeneutical (p. 13). The first simply describes the reality of diversity in America. The second, "cherished pluralism," describes the popular approval of diversity. For Americans, diversity is an unquestioned virtue. The final category is by far the most serious.

If you find yourself loving any pleasure better than your prayers, any book better than the Bible, any house better than the house of God, any table better than the Lord's table, any person better than Christ, any indulgence better than the hope of heaven—take alarm!

—THOMAS GUTHRIE

Whoever marries the spirit of this age will find himself a widower in the next.

—WILLIAM RALPH INGE

Philosophical pluralism has generated many approaches in support of one stance: namely, that any notion that a particular ideological or religious claim is intrinsically superior to another is necessarily wrong. The only absolute creed is the creed of pluralism. No religion has the right to pronounce itself right or true, and the others false, or even (in the majority view) relatively inferior In particular it is bound up with the new *hermeneutic* and with its stepchild, *deconstruction*. The outlook that it spawns is often labeled *postmodernism* (p. 19).

What follows is a balanced, energetic, and compassionate examination of pluralism. The primary exponents are quoted and summarized. In some cases, Carson takes time to interact in greater detail with particular positions. The summaries and details illustrate the breadth and depth of Carson's understanding. A forty-seven-page bibliography testifies to a thoroughly researched work, though Carson feels often compelled to apologize for his brevity in places.

Carson gives sensible and nuanced evaluations. He is always gracious, even when he ardently disagrees. His graciousness, however, never degenerates to denying the faith, either explicitly or implicitly.

From the pluralist's perspective, the Christian must appear a bigot, unless "Christian" is redefined so that it has no necessary connection with Scripture; from the Christian's perspective, the religious pluralist, however sincere, is both misguided and an idolater (p. 238).

In an amusing personal story, he tells of an exchange between himself and a doctoral student who styled herself a deconstructionist. When he turned her deconstructionist approach on her arguments, she was frustrated. His concluding remarks to her were insightful:

You are a deconstructionist . . . but you expect me to interpret your words aright. More precisely, you are upset because I seem to be divorcing the meaning I claim to see in your words with your intent. Thus, implicitly you affirm the link between text and authorial intent. I have never read a deconstructionist who would be pleased if a reviewer misinterpreted his or her work: thus in practice deconstructionists implicitly link their own texts with their own intentions. I simply want the same courtesy extended to Paul (p. 103).

This is not merely a negative book. Carson not only shows the problems with pluralism, he also gives direction to believers for evangelical interaction with a pluralistic culture. Carson elaborates in some detail the necessity of both understanding and proclaiming what he calls the "biblical plot-line." This is simply having a comprehensive understanding of redemptive history as God has revealed Himself. He believes this is essential both in accurate interpretation of God's written revelation as well as essential to effective evangelism in the face of biblical illiteracy. Later in the book, he uses Paul's message on Mars Hill in Acts 17 as an example of using redemptive history in evangelism (pp. 496-501). He also acknowledges the danger of some current evangelistic approaches:

If you begin with perceived needs, you will always distort the gospel. If you begin with the Bible's definition of our need, relating perceived needs to that central grim reality, you are more likely to retain intact the gospel of God (p. 221).

He deals with pluralism within evangelicalism as well. One chapter titled, "On Banishing the Lake of Fire," addresses the current popularity of annihilationist and postdeath conversion views on hell. There is also a fine appendix, "When Is Spirituality Spiritual?" in which

Carson insists, "spirituality must be thought about and sought after out of the matrix of core biblical theology" (p. 567).

There are two problems with the book. First, its size will keep many from reading it. Ministerial pragmatism is sad, but certain. It has been my unfortunate experience that if "How To . . ." doesn't appear in the title it won't be on a minister's shelf. Second, the arguments in some parts are vigorous and somewhat involved. The reader must do some thinking. Thinking is not something that comes naturally for American Christians. Thus, Carson's extraordinary grasp of so many issues can be a bit daunting. This final note is not a criticism of Carson as much as a criticism of the nonexistent Christian mind.

The church is often accused of entering battles with "too little, too late." The accusation is true. While we have been battling the dinosaur named "modernism," a dragon named "postmodernism" has taken the field. The dragon has singed a few of us when we used our antimodernist weaponry. While arguments against the old foe have at least provoked animated discussion, the new foe has responded differently. After all, what can you do with a dismissive shrug? Carson gives us a rigorous analysis of the main threat against Christianity today: pluralism. This a magnificent work if you're ready to go a few rounds with postmodern dragons.

DOUGLAS R. SHIVERS
Springfield, Missouri

C. S. LEWIS & FRANCIS SCHAEFFER: LESSONS FOR A NEW CENTURY FROM THE MOST INFLUENTIAL APOLOGISTS OF OUR TIME

Scott R. Burson and Jerry L. Walls

Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press (1998).

272 pages, paper, \$14.99.

At the beginning of each weekly episode of "The X-Files," the words "the truth is out there" are emblazoned across the screen. And each week, FBI agents Scully and Mulder seek to sort out a bewildering assortment of crimes, conspiracies, and paranormal occurrences in which the truth is always so far "out there" it seems tantalizingly out of reach. In counterpoint to such postmodern irony, Harvard entomologist, Edward O. Wilson, seeks to revive the Enlightenment dream of discovering the truth through reason in his new book, *Consilience*. A unified, unbroken "skein" of knowledge can be developed by science, he confidently says, because "all mental activity is material in nature and occurs in a manner consistent with the causal explanations of the natural sciences." Needless to say, seeking to commend Christianity as the truth into such a pluralistic society as ours can be, at times, a frustrating experience.

In *C. S. Lewis & Francis Schaeffer*, Scott Burson, director of communications, and Jerry Walls, professor of philosophy of religion—both at Asbury Theological Seminary, give us a model for commending the faith drawn from two of the most popular apologists of the twentieth century. The authors respect both Lewis and Schaeffer, and often express admiration for their thinking and work, contending that "the most influential apologists of our time can be valuable resources in retelling the old, old story to a brand-new age." Though sometimes critical, they clearly seek to be fair in their

assessment, and though I think them mistaken on several key issues, at no point is their criticism uncharitable.

C. S. Lewis & Francis Schaeffer is written in a clear and logical way, and the authors' argument is easy to follow. They open with a biographical sketch of Lewis and Schaeffer, and though they admit such an overview does not do justice to the topic, their identification of points of contrast and contact between the two men is a helpful place to begin. In the next four chapters Burson and Walls explore two areas of theology over which Schaeffer and Lewis were in disagreement: the meaning of salvation and biblical authority. "These disputes are especially relevant to our study," the authors say, "for few subjects are more integral to the apologetic task. But these disputes are noteworthy on one other count as well: they represent points of deep division within evangelicalism at large." The authors then turn to apologetics proper, beginning with a chapter in which they define three schools: presuppositionalism, evidentialism, and verificationism (they identify both Schaeffer and Lewis as representatives of the third approach). The next two chapters outline what they regard as the two apologists' offensive and defensive strategies. Finally, after offering an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, the final chapter lists twenty-one lessons Burson and Walls believe we can learn from Lewis and Schaeffer for commending the truth in the twenty-first century.

There is much to commend in *C. S. Lewis & Francis Schaeffer*. The authors' use fair, thoughtful, clear, and charitable argumentation. They also have a passion for the truth of the faith, and a deep desire to commend it winsomely and effectively in a postmodern culture. I can easily see the book used by Christian leaders as a guide both to help younger believers study the works of

Schaeffer and Lewis, and to sort out the key issues raised in the book: predestination and human freedom, the meaning of justification, the appeal to paradox and mystery, and the inerrancy and authority of Scripture. On the other hand, not surprisingly for authors who teach at Asbury Seminary, their conclusions find them in far greater agreement with Lewis' Anglican Arminianism than with Schaeffer's Presbyterian Calvinism. Thus, for example, they argue for "libertarian freedom" as opposed to unconditional election; for Lewis' "transformational" model of the atonement as opposed to Schaeffer's Reformed/legal understanding; even for Lewis's belief in purgatory. I found myself disagreeing, not merely at several key points in their analysis of Schaeffer, but far more crucially with their assessment of the *Westminster Confession* and the Reformed doctrine of salvation. "The position of the *Westminster Confession*," Burson and Walls write, "intends to safeguard divine glory. But, ironically, this position actually undercuts it." Since Schaeffer's commitment to the *Confession* motivated him to lecture on it in great detail at L'Abri, it would be fascinating to hear his response to that mistaken assertion.

In many respects the final chapter of *C. S. Lewis & Francis Schaeffer*—"Twenty-one Lessons for the Twenty-first Century"—though at the end of the book—is the heart of the authors' message. Though suffering from the same flaws just noted, there is much here that is worthy of careful reflection. Some of the lessons are what we would expect: the need to recapture a biblical concept of true moral guilt, the need to insist on the historicity of biblical claims, the need to demonstrate rigorous Christian community, and the need to engage the culture across the full scope of human life, thinking, and creativity. As well, some of the "Twenty-one Lessons,"

though rarely part of the evangelical approach to evangelism, provide insight into communicating the truth to those who do not share our deepest conviction; such as “emotional redemption” to foster and commend virtue in place of the unhealthy emotive romanticism of our culture—or the use of story and creativity to capture the minds and hearts of postmodern friends who are closed to truth claims, and the need to capture imaginations with “at least a glimpse of the hearty delights of heaven.”

A great deal of evangelism today is based on an unbiblical model in which a reductionistic version of a revivalist gospel is regurgitated without regard for the personality, interests, and concerns of the non-Christian who happens to be the recipient. The gospel of Jesus Christ must, instead, be preached powerfully, defended creatively, and exhibited winsomely. And, if anything is clear in this postmodern age, it is that the church needs to think deeply and Christianly about pre-evangelism and apologetics. *C. S. Lewis & Francis Schaeffer* is hardly the final word in the effort, but, even given its flaws, makes some helpful suggestions, and urges us to build on the thinking and work of two apologists who dedicated themselves to commending Christianity as the truth to a skeptical generation.

DENIS HAACK
Rochester, Minnesota