CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY

Volume 62: Number 1 January 1998

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Book Reviews

CHRISTIAN PLAIN STYLE: THE EVOLUTION OF A SPIRITUAL IDEAL. By Peter Auski. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1995. xii + 371 pages. $49.95.

With the exception of some of the more "exotic" recent developments in rhetorical theory, the long standing rapprochement between preaching and rhetoric should be explored because mastery of the latter imparts a degree of artistry to the former, and, conversely, the latter is ennobled by its relationship with the former. Peter Auksi has crafted a book that rewards those who desire to cultivate the field with a rich history of classical and medieval rhetorical doctrine, along with a close survey of the various positions taken by church fathers with respect to the place of pagan doctrine in Christian eloquence. The book should interest historians of rhetoric as well as seminarians who are inclined toward the study of homiletics from an historical and scholarly point of view.

Auksi first establishes the need for his work by discussing how plain style (as opposed to grand eloquence or the middle style) has suffered relative neglect in studies of pulpit oratory. The competition between plain and grand style is evident especially when training preachers because the embellished, colored, densely plaited grand style compacts the threads of discourse and colored figures together far more imposingly and magnificently than the coarse monochrome of the simple mode ever could. Still, the maker of simplicity could reply that he needed nothing of the tone, color, and paint assigned to the grandly statuesque, heavily embossed or engraved, and magnificently timbered construct of the inflated artisan (page 41). Chapter two serves as a decent primer on classical rhetoric (pages 36-40).

When the author begins to explicate Augustine's doctrine regarding plain style in Christian preaching, his thesis fully emerges. Like many earlier Fathers, Augustine observes that the Bible contains and uses all of the schemes, tropes, and rhetorical modes "more abundantly and copiously" than the classical models usually studied, and therefore, to understand Scripture fully, Christians must know rhetoric (pages 120-121). Auksi points out that, though Augustine appreciates each for its particular

excellence, he privileges the plain style in homiletics, and that, for Augustine, "Paul represents a model of stylistic humility; in this he is the scriptural source of the plain style. . . . powerful, careless of models, rules and grammar, and without the need to display or ornament discourse" (page 127). Auksi's analysis of Pauline rhetoric is, as the following illustrates, noteworthy for its refinement and insight: "Paul's essential style involves short, quick sentences, energetic imperatives and questions, an oscillation between questions and answers, sudden changes of tone, incantatory lists, and strong elements of dialogue. The small units placed beside one another in parataxis facilitate parallelism and a poetic, cadenced quality" (page 135).

Chapters five through nine constitute a tour de force of rhetoric in homiletic pedagogy and practice from the early medieval through modern times. Auksi discusses the likes of Jerome, Origen, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, Clement, Basil, and a host of minor figures. Of special note is the section entitled "The Provocative Link with the Reformation." Auksi there explores how the ideal of plainness in Reformation preaching (and also worship) is traced to the medieval "call for substance and spiritual meaning or truth, which one achieves by scorning the trivialities of style, sensuous adornments, worldly rhetorical embellishment, or materializing strategies of presentation" (page 202). For Auksi, the hallmark of Reformation renewal is a rejection of the sensuousness and superfluity of the secular or pagan culture revived by Renaissance scholarship. He posits that this rejection predominates the teachings of Luther, Calvin and Zwingli. Let us, in deference to the likely interests of the readers of this journal, focus on Luther.

Whereas Augustine identifies Paul as the epitome of plain style in Scripture, Auksi shows that Luther grants that place to Christ: "Christ instructs through parables in order to reach the understanding of every listener, confident in the knowledge that the unlettered are seized more by the pleasure which accompanies an image, comparison, or allegory than by recondite explanations" (page 209). Plainness was not only an ideal for preaching, but also in worship and hermeneutics, as illustrated by Luther's claim,

when translating the Bible into German that, "This is my last and best art, to translate the Scriptures in their plain sense. . . . the literal sense does it—in it there's life, comfort, power, instruction and skill. The other is tomfoolery, however brilliant the impression it makes" (page 213). For Luther, dialectic is the body which rhetoric clothes and adorns, so rhetoric without dialectic is worth nothing. Inspired by Paul's antitheses in 1 Corinthians 1:25 ("the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men"), Luther makes his own famous judgment in a series of dramatic oppositions: "truth is more powerful than eloquence, spirit is preferable to intellectual skill, and faith is greater than erudition" (page 214). It is interesting to note how utterly indispensable stylistic artifice is when one wishes to underscore a thought. Did Luther use the antitheses tongue-in-cheek, subconsciously, or did he fully appreciate that, though they need to be chastened, schemes and tropes are unavoidable'? I also appreciate the delightful irony in the way Auksi's study immerses the reader in a tradition that is itself held as problematic throughout most of the history that the author deftly sketches!

Writing later of the Baconian Revolution, Auksi claims that the drive to describe nature did not call for the colors of the imagination or the bias of the passions. The numerous attacks against the older ideal of luxuriant, inspired, and highly rhetorical prose in the last quarter of the seventeenth century occur at least in part because experimental science needed a clear, unfigured, and accurate medium of expression and in part because the excesses of religious enthusiasm and its hyperbolic language generated a counter movement of fearful criticism (pages 306-307).

These important motives notwithstanding, a few questions remain. First, does plain truth (*veritas*) equal "the pure milk of the word"? If so, is it not telling that that scriptural ideal (pure milk) is itself expressed metaphorically? It seems manifestly clear that Scripture teems so with figuration that the claim is mitigated, if not nullified, regarding the appropriateness of plain style when transmitting truth. What is more, I have trouble with the above presupposition, because I have always viewed rhetorical devices as a means of painting clear pictures with words (as opposed to

clouding truth). It is, to be sure, a power that can be used to enchant or charm an audience, but it seems that it all depends on one's moral purpose. Of course the fathers had to deal with those ubiquitous enthusiasts and various other gnostics; how better to elevate special knowledge than to render it incomprehensible through ostentation? Bacon and his progeny had to establish a niche for the new learning, but, as time has shown, a sterile scientism is no substitute for an elevating humanism.

Second, if plainness is a Christian ideal, why did Christ speak so often in parables? Jesus rarely spoke plainly. His followers actually asked that he speak more clearly (Matthew 13). It seems that Jesus veiled the truth, in part, so as not to cast his "pearls before swine. " (He appears to have taken particular delight in baffling the scribes and Pharisees.) Lady wisdom would be somewhat cheapened if, from the byways, the town gates, and the marketplace, she called those who lack insight while entirely disrobed. So much for naked dialectic. Still, insofar as preachment is not about calling, but about building faith, Auksi's (and the fathers') point is well taken.

Christian Plain Style is, at once, both a treasury of rhetorical theory and history and of homiletic pedagogy. It is yeoman's work, finely crafted; a happy combination.

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REFORMED CONFESSIONALISM IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA: ESSAYS ON THE THOUGHT OF JOHN WILLIAMSON NEVIN. Edited by Sam Hamstra Jr. and Arie J. Griffioen. ATLA Monograph Series, Number 38. Lanham, Maryland and London: The American Theological Library Association and The Scarecrow Press, 1995.

One of the more pleasing developments in the historiography of Christianity in the United States over the past several years has been the rediscovery of the theological and philosophical work of

John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886). Nevin, born a Presbyterian, spent the most productive years of his life as a theological professor at the German Reformed seminary at Mercersburg, Pennsylvania (1840-1853). His thought ranged over some of the most important issues of his day: the place of tradition, the nature of the sacraments, ecclesiology, the doctrine of the ministry, and the relationship of the Church to American culture. This volume is a great benefit in offering both overview and detailed treatments of Nevin's thought. It is a most welcome addition to the scholarship on American Christianity in general and expressions of confessionalism in America in particular.

The volume is a collection of essays that feature some of the well-established names in Nevin interpretation (Richard Wentz, Walter Conser Jr. and Charles Yrigoyen Jr., among others), as well as some newer lights (Arie Griffioen and Glenn Hewitt). The plethora of scholars offers a variety of interpretations and perspectives on Nevin's work.

Divided into two parts, *Reformed Confessionalism* treats the historical and intellectual context of Nevin's work and the main theological issues that he addressed. James D. Bratt's "Nevin and the Antebellum Culture Wars" examines Nevin's running battle with the cultural peculiarities of the United States. Of foremost concern to Nevin was the degeneration of the divinely and sacramentally instituted Church into a mere aggregate of like-minded individuals. For him the Antichrist was not the papacy, but the "spirit of sect and schism"—namely, Arminian theology and revivalistic practice—which permeated American politics, economics and theology, and stretched and tore at the fabric of the true Church. Nevin argued that the stress on the decision of the individual to give his or her heart to Jesus, or the idea that the Church was simply a voluntary association paralleled American political thought in that both

> run into low cunning, disingenuous trickery and jesuitic policy. Religion [like politics] degenerates with it into a trade, in which men come to terms with God [the nation] on the subject of their own salvation [citizenship and office], and lay

> away their spiritual acquisitions of outward property for convenient use (page 10).

In contrast, Nevin argued that the human will could achieve no spiritual good apart from the work of God working through Word and Sacraments. Speaking in Edwardsian (and Augustinian) terms, Nevin described the manner in which God brings people to faith.

> What we all need . . . is not just good doctrine for the understanding, or good direction for the will, or good motives for the heart, but the power rather of a new life, which, proceeding from God and being inserted into our fallen nature, may redeem us from the vanity of this present evil world, and make us to be in such sort "partakers of the divine nature" (page 11).

Put another way, as Bratt duly notes, "Nevin searched the Church Fathers for the constitution of Christianity and found the creed and the sacraments" (page 11). While Nevin's notion of infusion may make Lutherans somewhat uncomfortable, his critique of the pernicious effect Arminianism has on Christian theology is well directed.

Richard Wentz's piece is one of the high points of the work (one may also see his recent book on Nevin, *John Nevin: American Theologian* [New York: Oxford, 1997]). Correctly noting Nevin's conviction that "revivalistic evangelical tradition is very much in harmony with utilitarian individualism," which is primarily geared to the "maximization of self-interest," Wentz then provides a careful and positive examination of Nevin's "catholic" ideal and the means he proposed for its realization in an antagonistic setting.

In the second part of the book the pieces by Conser, Griffioen, and, especially, Hamstra. stand out. Hamstra's "Nevin on the Pastoral office" has much to contribute to the continued debate over Church and Ministry in Lutheran circles. Here the author, through Nevin, shows us that the questions raised by Vehse, Walther, Grabau, and Löhe had their counterparts outside the

Lutheran tradition. In brief, Nevin taught that because pastoral office has its origin in Christ and is an extension of the ministry of the apostles, the properly called and ordained pastor dispenses objective and spiritual realities that one cannot obtain anywhere else. Flying in the face of utilitarian individualism, which stressed the right of private judgement and the priesthood of *every* believer at the expense of the priesthood of *all* believers (to borrow Dr. Jeffery Oschwald's phrase), Nevin argued that

> The office is of divine origin, and of truly supernatural character and force; flowing directly from the Lord Jesus Christ himself, as the fruit of his Resurrection and triumphant Ascension into heaven, and being designed by him to carry forward the purposes of his grace upon the earth, in the salvation of men by the Church, to the end of time (page 171).

Not surprisingly, Nevin viewed Matthew 28:19-20 as directed to the disciples—a commissioning service in which Christ gave the keys to the apostles and set them apart to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments. In sum, Nevin fought "the Americanization of the ministry" (page 185). Whether one accepts Nevin's conclusions or not, his serious engagement with critical questions and formidable arguments will challenge his readers.

The book does, however, have its low points. Due to the collaborative nature of the text (it is a collection of articles, after all), much of the historical material regarding Nevin's life appears again and again. More problematic, though, are two articles. First, John Payne's "Nevin on Baptism" suffers from a rigid chronological treatment. A more synthetic/thematic examination of the topic would have been more satisfying. Second, Yrigoyen's "Nevin and Methodism" seems totally out of place. It is more an apologetic for "true" Methodism—a critique of Nevin's critique of Methodism—than it is a fruitful consideration of Nevin's work. Yrigoyen tries to excuse the aberrations of nineteenth-century Methodism by arguing that "as in the matter of baptism, American Methodists did not precisely follow their founder's teaching of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper" (page 225). Wesley scholars may affirm this assertion, but it has little to do

with the accuracy of Nevin's historical/theological appraisal of American Methodism as it existed in his time. He reacted against the unchurchly failings of Methodism as he experienced it. It is unfortunate that such an article sullies an otherwise outstanding collection. Finally, the book is marred by inconsistent endnote form and far too many typographical errors.

Despite its somewhat prohibitive cost, students of the history of Christianity in America will want to have this book on their shelves. Books on Nevin tend to go out of print quickly. This fine collection of essays, along with its very fine bibliography, offers a snapshot of this multifaceted and eminently articulate proponent of confessional Reformed theology. An honest reading might also help to remove the scales of caricature from the eyes of many Lutherans regarding the Reformed tradition.

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Books Received

Braswell, Jr., George W. *Islam: Its Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power.* Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996. xii + 338 pages. Paper. $24.99

Bredero, Adriaan H. *Bernard of Clairvaux: Between Cult and History.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996. xiv + 320 pages. Cloth. $30.00

Kinnamon, Michael, and Brian E. Cope, editors. *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997. xiv + 548 pages. Paper

Kuklick, Bruce, and D. G. Hart, editors. *Religious Advocacy and American History.* Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 1997. xx + 233 pages. Paper. $24.00

Wendland, Ernst H. *The Diary of a Missionary.* Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996. viii + 319 pages. Paper. $12.99

Wenham, David. *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 1995. xvi + 452 pages. Paper

White, L. Michael. *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture,* volume 1: *Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews and Christians.* Harvard Theological Studies 42. Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1996. xi + 211 pages. Paper. $17.00

Link, Geo. *Family Devotions for Every Day of the Church Year: Gathered from the Writings of Dr. Martin Luther.* Translated from the German by Joel Baseley. Dearborn, Michigan: Mark V Publications, 1996. 688 pages. Cloth. $22.00

Levinskaya, Irina. *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting,* volume 5: *Diaspora Setting.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996. xii + 284 pages. Cloth. $38.00

Placher, William C. *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong.* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996. xii + 222 pages. Paper

Prickett, Stephen. *Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xvi + 288 pages. Cloth. $ 54.95

Quill, Timothy C. J. *The Impact of the Liturgical Movement on American Lutheranism.* Drew Series in Liturgy, No.3. Lanham, Maryland/London: The Scarecrow Press, 1997. xv+ 253 pages. Cloth. $45.00

Schlatter, Adolf. *The History of the Christ:: The Foundation of New Testament Theology.* Translated by Andreas J. Koestenberger. Original German edition, 1923. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997. 426 pages. Cloth. $29.99

Volf, Miroslav, Carmen Krieg, and Thomas Kucharz, editors. *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Moltmann.* Grand Rapids/Cambridge, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996. xviii + 298 pages. Cloth. $35.00

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. x + 326 pages. Cloth. $59.95. Paper. $18.95