

John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed. *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*. Published jointly by Baker Book House, Regent College Publishing, and InterVarsity Press, 2000.

The book *Evangelical Futures* is perhaps one of the most important books on theological method to emerge in recent times. This is not because of its commitment to traditional evangelical theological prolegomena. In fact, many evangelicals will be disheartened by the directions taken by some of the authors in the book. Its importance lies in the fact that this book alerts the thoughtful Christian reader to the developments in evangelical thinking that are a direct result of the influence of the rise of postmodernism in present day culture. While the book does not ignore traditional evangelical theological method (note the article by J. I. Packer and to some extent the one by John Stackhouse), most of the authors speak in an atmosphere that appears to be somewhat anti-Western (at least downplaying its significance), definitely anti-Enlightenment, pro-culture, and less objective in its view of theology than an older evangelicalism.

Two introductory articles are given. One by Alister McGrath evaluates the “state of the art” of evangelical method. In particular he reviews several issues in the current debate about theological method such as biblical authority, hermeneutics, tradition, the relationship of philosophy and theology, dialogue with other non-evangelical Christian traditions, and communication of theology in non-Western cultures. Of special interest is that McGrath raises the question: “Has Evangelicalism Lost Interest in Theology?” His answer is no in contrast to David Wells (*No Place for Truth*) and a host of evangelicals who worry about the current slippage of biblical based convictions in the evangelical camp. John Stackhouse provides a second introductory article entitled “Evangelical Theology Should Be Evangelical.” In it, he provides encouragement for evangelicals to maintain a focus on Christ and salvation, the Bible, conversion, and evangelistic mission that has been part and parcel of the twentieth century definition of evangelicalism.

Part Two of the book gives two programmatic proposals. Kevin J. Vanhoozer writes on “The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology.” This article is a combination of new terminology that attempts to convey the poetry side of the theological enterprise and the use of technical language that obscures that very end. A much better article is Stanley Grenz’ “Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism” which has been taken from an earlier work by him (*Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* published by Baker). This is the most important article in the entire book and should be read carefully. While Grenz too quickly abandons the idea of certainty in theological assertions, his well-crafted article demonstrates how the postmodern mindset with its focus on pluralism leads to a view of “local theologies” rather than a seeking after one overarching metanarrative or theological system that is universally true for all times. There are good insights in his presentation that even the traditional evangelical must heed. For example, it is important that we do not substitute our own theological formulations for the inspired word of God. We must also take into account how the Enlightenment has affected our prior theological statements.

However, Grenz' approach emphasizes too strongly the role of the community in doing theology (not a bad idea kept in balance) while Scripture, tradition, and culture are brought together as the troika of theological method. The traditional evangelical will wonder if Scripture is actually being short-changed in Grenz' approach. It is also not self-evident that the current postmodern cultural climate calls for the abandonment of foundationalism with its view of the certainty of truth claims and its commitment to the correspondence theory of truth. In this Grenz shows that he is part of the larger postconservative impulse. However, the early Church was faced with a pluralistic culture much like our own today yet there does not seem to be a watering down of commitment to certitude concerning spiritual truth. Nonetheless, Grenz' clear article will help the astute reader to understand the debate about these issues much more sharply than other writers of the same disposition.

Part Three of the book gives two articles on the issue of tradition, one by Alister McGrath ("Engaging the Great Tradition: Evangelical Theology and the Role of Tradition") and Stephen Williams ("The Theological Task and Theological Method: Penitence, Parasitism, and Prophecy"). Both articles will stretch the biblical evangelical with a greater commitment to the positive side of tradition than much of evangelicalism has allowed. The good side of these presentations is that it forces evangelicals to have a historical perspective which includes an appreciation for what God has done the last two thousand years and for what He is doing now among many diverse Christian groups. The down side would be the question of whether this leads to an unbiblical ecumenism that really does not have the Bible at the center of its theology.

The final section contains three responses which form an easily understood spectrum. J. I. Packer writes about "Maintaining Evangelical Theology" where he has a concern that any developments in theological method must maintain a commitment to basic evangelical concerns from the past. Trevor Hart talks of "Imagining Evangelical Theology" where he explores the need for seeing hints of creativity in the biblical text as well as in using creativity in doing theology normatively. His statement "The 'biblicist' insistence on the 'historicity' of such books as Job or Jonah, or on reading the apocalyptic visions of Daniel and Revelation as straightforwardly predictive (the 'facts' of the future), and the liberal passion for demythologizing the gospels and Old Testament patriarchal narratives actually (and ironically) amount in practice to much the same thing: a stripping of the textual altars in a bid to purge all hint of imaginative influence" (p. 193) will no doubt bother many conservative evangelicals. Roger Olson's response is "Reforming Evangelical Theology" which applauds discussions about evangelical theological method which do not obsessively fear liberal theology, do not set up rigid theological boundaries, the abandonment of Enlightenment realism and rationalism, a "respect for doctrinal heritage without rigid traditionalism," and an increase in the appreciation of the category of experience in doing theology. This is the applauding of the agenda of postconservative theology that, in the end, may have little to do with genuine evangelical theology.

The book *Evangelicals Futures* would be recommended graduate level reading but probably not appropriate for Bible college level studies. It will assist the thoughtful pastor, teacher, or student in understanding how present culture is impacting discussions about how one should do theology. However, a critical reading is necessary, lest one

naively adopts an agenda that will take him outside the orb of full commitment to a biblical view of truth.

Reviewed by Mike Stallard