

Biblical Theology in Outline: The Vitality of the Word of God. By Klaus Nürnberger. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, Cluster Publications 2004.

This book tackles two live questions in current discussion about the biblical foundations of mission. The first concerns the nature of Scripture. Both the fundamentalist and liberal paradigms seem indebted to the Enlightenment, and for the Bible to function authoritatively for the church's mission today a new paradigm must be forged. The second is the relationship between the biblical text and the contemporary missional situation. What kind of hermeneutic enables one to faithfully and creatively bring the gospel to bear on current issues that face the church in its mission today? Klaus Nürnberger, professor emeritus of theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, attempts to forge an approach to biblical hermeneutics that begins to address these issues. He believes that his approach "has repercussions for a holistic, situational approach to mission."

Nürnberger wants to move beyond the rationalistic approach of Protestant scholasticism, which imposes a foreign understanding of perfection and inerrancy on the text, and a liberal approach that reduces the Scriptures to one more historical record of the religious experience of Israel. For Nürnberger, the Word of God was first spoken and lived in specific historical circumstances, thus addressing specific historical needs. It was only later that it was written, so that particular disclosures formed paradigms of redemption, each of which emerged and evolved in biblical history in response to changing needs. The trajectory of these paradigms in biblical history reveals a distinctive undercurrent of meaning. For example, the undercurrent of meaning of the patriarchal paradigm is the gratuity of God's redeeming action on behalf of his people.

As we read the biblical story we are drawn into an evolutionary process in which these undercurrents of meaning are worked out in their significance for current situations. In the process, earlier paradigms are relativized, superseded, redefined, and even corrected in new contexts. The first part of the book articulates this hermeneutical method. The second part traces six paradigms – patriarchal; exodus; monarchy; priesthood and sacrifice; covenant, law and grace; and creation and new creation – tracing each through its evolutionary development through the Old Testament into the New Testament, and finally noting its trajectory for the present day. We are encouraged to continue this pattern, bringing the "undercurrent of meaning" of earlier revelational paradigms to bear on our context.

There is much that is attractive about the book. Most notably one will gain insight into the way that God's revelation can be reinterpreted and reincarnated afresh in various situations in response to changing need. A Greek view of truth has caused us to formulate truth in terms of unchanging ideas. When Scripture becomes a repository of unchanging ideas, bringing the truth to bear on the present brings insoluble problems. A more biblical view of truth sees the historical revelation that discloses God's redemptive purposes for the world and involves God's people in his mission. These events are brought to bear on ever-changing situations in a fresh and relevant way. This ongoing revelation and contextual embodiment form a story into which the church is called to live. Nürnberger's approach highlights this kind of contextual and progressive approach. The book is rife with insights into the biblical story and its significance for today.

I was left with questions, however, about whether Nürnberger's paradigms sufficiently grasped God's revelation, and whether his understanding of progressive revelation was not

too tied to post-Enlightenment notions of evolution. Nevertheless this book will open up the dynamic and transformative power of God's revelation for ever new contexts.

I also have other questions about his approach, especially its understanding of scriptural authority. One concerns his notion of critique. Later contextual incarnations critique earlier erroneous understandings of God's revelation. Today we critique the biblical text in the same way later biblical authors critiqued earlier paradigms of revelation. Sometimes critique is what he calls "historical critique," which simply means becoming aware of the historical and cultural location of the text and struggling to see the relevance for the present context. At other times critique is more problematic, what he calls "ideological" or "theological" critique. Here the revelation in Scripture is plainly erroneous or even immoral. To make this kind of critique one must have a criterion, and Nürnberger's criterion is "comprehensive well-being" or *shalom*. But what creates norms for discerning such well-being? Some of his elements of *shalom*, by which he critiques older forms of the biblical text, look suspiciously like current trends. For example, he critiques patriarchy and monarchy with egalitarian arguments.

Nürnberger begins each chapter with questions and comments to prompt the reader and ends with questions that help the reader reflect on the content of the chapter. These are well-thought out and provocative, and, along with the content of the book, will raise very important issues about the nature of Scripture and its ongoing relevance for today. Few issues are more important for missiology.

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