

The rest of the chapter again engages modernist sceptics of the resurrection narrative.

Despite the effort he has put into proving the historical plausibility and theological significance of Christ's resurrection, O'Collins ends by quoting Wittgenstein as he affirms that 'it is love that believes in the resurrection' (p. 114). Further, O'Collins suggests, the resurrection attunes our spiritual senses to cultivate love of God and love of neighbour through a proper, awe-filled awareness of the Creator and the creation.

Some Augustine scholars will find this book lacking in its methodology. O'Collins only occasionally (and then briefly) places Augustine in his intellectual or cultural context. Most of the secondary literature on Augustine referenced by the author comes from a small selection of (quite good) edited volumes, handbooks and the like. The argument proceeds not with close readings of passages but with numbered theses supported with catenae of brief, unanalysed quotations.

Yet readers would be remiss to dismiss O'Collins' work. *Augustine on the Resurrection* should be received as both a gift and an invitation. For some, O'Collins provides a foundation for more constructive reflection on the meaning of the resurrection in a world that knows all too much of death. For others, like myself, O'Collins invites deeper engagement with this topic in Augustine and other patristic authors.

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Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017), pp. xvii + 289. \$40.00.

Willie James Jennings' remarkable Acts commentary lays out one of its most interesting and important (and telling, I think) claims two-thirds of the way through. Discussing the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, Jennings does there what he does throughout: offer dichotomous pictures, one of God on the move and another of the church, including the author of Luke-Acts, lagging behind:

How do you capture in words the dynamic of life together, not just life together but a holy joining of life, the life of the Spirit of God within our lives. How do you capture not simply a new movement but a movement that always renews and makes new? ... God is always ahead of us, calling to us to keep up and not turn back. We sometimes forget how strong the

pull back is for us. This is not a matter of sin or our sinful condition. Nor is this a matter of faithlessness. It is fundamentally the struggle with the new and the unknown even if it is perceived by us as neither new nor unknown. (p. 141)

The brilliance of Jennings' commentary is its ability to not only hold in tension the two pictures, God wondrously 'always ahead of us, calling us to keep up' and the church chronically pulling back, but also force the reader, including this one, to question whether she, in her reactions to what she is reading, is stuck in the second.

Sustaining the tension for that long, however, comes with a cost, raising the question, 'Is there ever a moment where the church is in any serious sense with God, perhaps not in lockstep, but at least sharing enough semblance that one can meaningfully speak about the church's positive witness?' Similar questions arose in Jennings' extraordinary and extraordinarily well-received *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, which should be read in tandem with this volume. There, the answer to the question of whether the church ever shows something positive about God was, 'Not so much'. Indeed, the worst moments of the church, as related in *The Christian Imagination's* harrowing theological histories, are precisely those moments where semblance is presumed, even desired.

Jennings' treatment of Acts 15 casts serious suspicion on the passage's seeming resolution of the thorny issues raised by Gentile Christianity. Consider for a moment New Testament scholar C. K. Barrett's comparatively sanguine view of Acts 15: 'In ch. 15 the extension of the Gospel to the Gentiles (which runs through chs. 1–14) is threatened; the Council deals with the problem; not only is the problem solved, its solution leads to further advance (15.35, and the rest of the book). Chapter 15 may thus be said to determine the shape of Acts as a whole'³ Jennings is not so sure. Rather than resolution, much less reconciliation, Jennings sees the story – and by extension, the entirety of the biblical narrative – as dramatising the 'distance' between God's forward moving activity and Christians straining to keep up. Referring presumably to commentators like Barrett, Jennings writes,

Unfortunately, it has often gone unnoticed by too many readers and commentators on this scene in Acts. The Gentiles are there, but not there, spoken about but not spoken with. This is a scene of the Gentile-in-theory, not the Gentile-in-reality in conversation, in reciprocal and mutual interaction. How could there have been mutual interaction and reciprocity

³ C. K. Barrett, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), p. 226.

at this early stage? Would that not have been premature, problematic, or even impossible? The danger with thinking pragmatically at this moment is to normalize this absence. (pp. 143–4, emphasis original)

And then the clincher: ‘The church has been guilty of just such a normalization’, from which Jennings extrapolates the following:

We are the inheritors of the legacy of segregation that has powerfully and successfully reduced the way we imagine church life. We have settled for what was gestured at in Acts 15, a form of segregation that allowed Gentile believers to go their way and for Jewish believers to leave them alone (Acts 15:29). We have followed a segregationist trajectory and settled for a unity in the Spirit that denies that the creaturely body is destined for communion not only with God but with others. (pp. 144 and 146)

This is a stunning set of conclusions. Stunning not for its ‘not only with God but with others’ picture of communion but for its supposition that the New Testament church, in its disappearance and then segregation of Gentile Christians, failed to achieve that communion. It should come as no surprise to find the activity of God portrayed as gathering (creatures, nations, enemies, etc.), though Jennings’s tropes of ‘newness’ and ‘revolution’ do so with compellingly fresh insistence; but it is a rare thing to see the church effectively removed from the site of that gathering activity.

Difficult questions follow Jennings’ stunner of a commentary, which is beautiful for its formulations, engagements, clarity, erudition and aims. On the one hand, Jennings’ claim about the Jerusalem Council, which epitomises much of the work he does in the commentary, continues his broader theological indictment of whiteness as the historically catastrophic drive toward domination, which is not different than what he describes here as an idolatrous attempt to impede God’s movement toward commonness. On the other hand, the relationship between how Jennings reads the failure of the church here in Acts 15 and how he more broadly thematises that failure in terms of the contemporary church’s diseased whiteness raises for Christians troubling theoretical and practical questions about the church’s prospects for fruitful witness. Jennings is right to interrogate presumptions the church has of itself, especially self-justifying pronouncements of ‘the Church’ and their full-throated pretensions. But one might ask, ‘Is the church ever faithful?’ Putting ethical questions to the church and holding it to account seems to indicate that the church, at least for moments at a time, is capable of a faithfulness that would hold up under inspection. And if accountable to that expectation, should we not hope that the church’s

faithfulness might be pressed into service of witnessing to God's redeeming activity, including God's redeeming activity of the church and, hope against hope, God's redeeming activity through the church? One might imagine a modern-day Gentile, herself well aware of the church's many terrors, stumbling across some ordinary enactment of Acts 15 and finding the resolution on offer as good news, as grace and invitation, an immanent logic enabled by the Spirit. One might want to consider such possibilities just as Barrett wanted to think of Acts 15's Gentile moment, as a point of literary resolution and moral advance. But are we self-deceived for wanting things to go this way? Are moments of semblance between the church's ethical life and God's sacramental presence so rare as to render hermeneutic suspicion the churchgoer's basic posture? Are we always left behind, segregated from God's communion, even and especially in those moments when we desire to be included? Is the drama of redemption finally frozen in dialectic, a picture of God's energy and another of ecclesial lassitude? The goal of Jennings' commentary is to raise these difficulties, to trouble our confidence and question our imaginations. The effect is, for better or for worse, to put everything in question.

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Christian Grethlein, *An Introduction to Practical Theology: History, Theory, and the Communication of the Gospel in the Present*, trans. Uwe Rasch (Waco: TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), pp. ix + 268. \$34.95.

Practical theology in the UK tends to draw from mainly Anglophone sources, looking to research from North America and South Africa in English or works in translation from other major centres such as Germany, the Netherlands and Latin America (including Brazil). One of the consequences of this is that has probably not engaged sufficiently with German-speaking traditions of practical theology – or that any such influence begins and ends with Friedrich Schleiermacher. So it is good to welcome the publication of this book, translated and much abridged from its German original, as an opportunity to gain an overview of the discipline in Germany. In the process, we recognise how divergent practical theology can be, according to its intellectual, ecclesial and cultural contexts.

The focus of practical theology, according to Grethlein, is 'the theory and communication of the gospel'. Since the gospel constitutes the core of Christian belief and practice, then practical theology must interrogate