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Review: The Catholic roots of the Protestant Gospel: Encounter between the Middle Ages and the Reformation

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Catholic Roots of the Protestant Gospel: Encounter Between the Reformation. By Stephen Strehle. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996, 146 pp., \$67.50.

With this new work that analyzes the various formative influences of medieval Catholic theological and philosophical thinking upon the central elements of the Reformation gospel, Stephen Strehle establishes himself yet more firmly as one of the finest and most capable evangelical historical theologians today. He is also a scholar willing to buck the tide, the accepted views, in the pursuit of a clearer picture of our theological underpinnings, especially in relation to late medieval, reformational, and post-reformational scholastic developments. In *Catholic Roots of the Protestant Gospel*, Strehle exposes the glaring error of much of Protestantism's view of medieval Catholicism, a view often espousing pure antithesis and the creation of strawmen, and then clarifies the strong lineage all Protestants have in numerous developments in Roman Catholic thought. In this way he hopes too that healing and not further entrenchment result from the exposure of these connections. Through his process, Strehle is not intending to negate the "spirit of the Reformation" but to correct its more unfortunate tendencies—especially among the scholastic heirs.

After a helpful introduction Strehle wrestles with five of the many elements of the "Protestant gospel." In each case, we find that the "gospel" was not suddenly "recovered" by a pure, direct reading of Paul after centuries of "Romanist" or "papal" corruption, but arose directly and indirectly from several of the many streams of theological development which made up the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. Indeed, it seems that much of the Reformation was not so much anti-Catholic at its heart as it was a specific response (and often a reaction) to the dominant Thomistic orthodoxy. In the face of this edifice, the Reformers are found to teach faith and assurance, certitude against "doctrines of doubt." Particular emphasis was placed upon the full saving effectiveness of Christ's *past* work upon the cross, security, deductivistic salvation schemes, and "federal" conditions of redemption.

Throughout his discussion, Strehle's purposes are largely genealogical, critical, and corrective. In uncovering the Catholic lineage of these elements of the Protestant gospel, he is able also to show the problematic effects in each case, effects which have usually ended in the loss of much of the original insights of the two leading Reformers, Luther and Calvin. Various lines of Catholic theological thinking—especially from Duns Scotus and Ockham, elements of predestinarian thought from Augustine and Erasmus, coupled with that ultimate theological guideline (!), Aristotle's "law of contradiction"—are found to be the bases from which and by which Lutheranism and Calvinism, as distinct from Luther and Calvin, waged theological battle with the Thomistic orthodoxy of Roman Catholicism. But these Catholic theological elements, as coupled with the distinctive concerns of the Reformation, created seemingly insuperable tensions and destructive dichotomies/dualisms within the doctrines of God, Christ and redemption, tensions that Luther and Calvin were usually able to hold together.

By way of recommendation, *The Catholic Roots of the Protestant Gospel* is needed scholarship. Strehle has given us an excellent and penetrating work. It is a work which faces up to the all too common vitriol of so much of Reformed orthodoxy—a tradition

almost legendary in its inability to be self-critical. The scope of this work, contrary to the usual hagiography and divisive historico-theological apologetics, is to inject into Protestant theological tradition and future Protestant-Roman Catholic dialogue the fresh air of confession, self-criticism, and recognition of real theological relationship as well as difference. As such, with all of the excellent historico-theological scholarship contained in this succinct volume, Strehle admits the presence of much negative criticism, but as he states from the beginning, the purpose of this book is not to extol the virtues of the Reformation and its successors ("which are considerable") but to "confess its faults and admit its excesses." Strehle's contribution is found in his clearing of the ground as well as in some theological, christological, soteriological and ecclesiological synthesis of his own. *Catholic Roots* leaves us all uncomfortable at many points, but its blows are the blows of a friend and of one seeking reconciliation in the context of the real truth of God in the living Jesus Christ.

By way of criticism, a few concerns need to be expressed. First, Strehle's critical analysis seems, from time to time, to rise in negativity of portrayal beyond what is needed. Choice of terms, inclusions, images created in the process of argument do on occasion become somewhat "strawy" (to borrow a term from Luther). This tendency may have been engendered by the wrath of the "Reformed faithful" that Strehle has received from his previous in-depth, groundbreaking scholarship regarding Reformation theological developments (e.g. *Calvinism, Federalism and Scholasticism*). Also, Strehle acknowledges a "deconstructionist" methodology and thus, to some extent, the negation of authorial intent. To the extent that Strehle approaches the thought of these theologians in the post-modernist fashion of Derrida or Rorty (who is explicitly referred to), and thus with the negation of objectivity and all "Logocentrism," I must say *Nein!* But my sense is that Strehle is not strictly deconstructing the Lutheran and Reformed tradition but looking carefully not only at explicit expression, but to less obvious lines of thought as well, for clear but (for the author) unconscious influences that led to both insightful and problematic outcomes.

In any case, Stephen Strehle's work must be regarded as one of the most significant historical-theological works in some time. On the whole excellent. Must reading.

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Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach. By W. Randolph Tate. Revised ed. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997, xxvi + 276 pp., \$24.95.

One of the fun things about following hermeneutical theory in the 1990s is watching critics from diverse fields and backgrounds wade into the field of biblical interpretation and attempt to set the discipline straight. In this regard, W. R. Tate's *Biblical Interpretation* does not disappoint. It seems that he too has been watching the hermeneutical battle-lines shift with each new charge, and he has advanced into the fray in an attempt to rally the disparate contenders as allies rather than foes.

Tate's premise is that the meaning of texts "results from a conversation between the world of the text and the world of the reader" (p. xxiv). Whereas other interpretive models give primacy to the author, the text itself or the reader, Tate sets forth an egalitarian model in which these three components concert together to manufacture meaning. For him, meaning is not located in any one (or two) of these provinces. Rather, meaning is "found . . . in the interplay between all three worlds" (p. xxv).

Following a brief introduction in which Tate proffers his thesis, the book is divided into three units. Unit one is dedicated to the historical "world behind the text" (author),



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