

thoughts are balanced and show a concern for further discussion and for the appropriation of the work by theologians. I would suggest it is essential reading for anyone interested in NT background, Christology, or the historical development of Trinitarian theology.

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**Steven B. Sherman. *Revitalizing Theological Epistemology: Holistic Evangelical Approaches to the Knowledge of God*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series 83. Oregon: Pickwick, 2008. (xi + 278 pp.)**

In recent years epistemology has become one of the flash points between fundamentalists and evangelicals, and between those influenced more by the Enlightenment than postmodernity. Steven Sherman (Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics, Winebrenner Theological Seminary, USA) presents a study about ‘contemporary evangelical approaches to the knowledge of God, considering – and suggesting – ways Christian philosophers and theologians envision and make use of theological knowledge in the postmodern context’ (xv). Sherman’s work is especially focussed on postconservative evangelical theological epistemology, now prevalent in almost all the major evangelical seminaries. Taking Roger Olsen’s 1995 article in the *Christian Century* as the manifesto of postconservative evangelicalism, Sherman seeks to articulate what the epistemology of this movement is, how it is different – and better – than Enlightenment rationalism, and then present some commendable paradigms for consideration. Finally, Sherman provides his own constructive proposal and offers practical steps for revitalizing evangelical theological epistemology.

According to Sherman, Clark Pinnock is the ‘father of postconservative evangelical theology’ (8) and he is used as *the* paradigm to explain the shift from classical foundationalism to a reformist evangelical approach to theological knowledge (18-69). According to Sherman, Pinnock’s career has developed over three main phases: the early years (1960s – 74), in which his Calvinistic

theology resulted in an adoption of a classical foundationalism and a bibliocentrism; the middle years (1974-88) in which Arminianism was embraced and a soft rationalism was developed and a christocentrism; and the later years (1989 – the present) in which a neo-Wesleyan or open theistic theology is being developed along with an acceptance of a range of epistemological ideas from various Christian traditions, including some outside of evangelicalism and a focus on the Spirit and experience. Sharing Pinnock's assessment of his theological pilgrimage, Sherman presents Pinnock's theological development as a model for postconservative evangelicals everywhere.

After examining the emergence of postconservatism through the lens of Clark Pinnock, Sherman outlines the essence of postconservative theological epistemology. Sherman sets up a dichotomy between a traditionalist approach to epistemology (*sola scriptura*) with a revisionist approach (*prima scriptura*) which in turn justifies a reconsideration of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (scripture, tradition, reason, experience). According to Sherman, 'Even while evangelical intellectuals of different traditions continue to debate the question of *sola* as it pertains to theological knowledge, consensus persists as to the *primacy* and *priority* of the written word above all other sources of theology' (152). Postconservatives seek to incorporate socially-oriented methods into their epistemology and as a result, various sources of theology beyond scripture are appealed to. Sherman examines three representative examples: Stanley Grenz who incorporates culture into his epistemology; Kevin Vanhoozer who constructs a canonical-linguistic epistemology, and Robert Webber who advocates an ecclesial approach to theological epistemology which endeavours to take the *regula fidei* with all seriousness. In Sherman's estimation each of these moves represents the general direction postconservative theological epistemology is and should go.

In order to commend a paradigm for theological method and its epistemology Sherman recommends the methodology of Lesslie Newbigin, a model of postconservatism. In Sherman's analysis Newbigin's theological epistemology is christocentric rather than bibliocentric, ecclesial rather than individualistic, and personal

rather than rationalistic. While there are some points of difference between Newbigin and postconservatives, in the role of experience for instance, the similarities outnumber these differences. Newbigin's 'holistic' approach is thus recommended for postconservatives to follow. In light of Newbigin's epistemology Sherman seeks to 'chart a constructive way forward for evangelical scholarship to implement a revitalized, holistic theological epistemology, incorporating many of the characteristics of Newbigin's methodology, while making use of addition [sic] suggestions herein' (250-251). The following recommendations are offered: adopting a christocentric focus rather than a bibliocentric one (his *prima* versus *sola scriptura* principle); a Spirit oriented method (and with it an inclusivism); an instrumental use of Scripture read as a narrative by and within a faith community; the recovery of the role of tradition (what he calls *opinio*); recognising culture as a theological source; and finally, ecclesial participation in which loving praxis dominates. In the final sentence of the work we read that a revitalized evangelical epistemology 'will be a model of theological knowledge incorporating biblical perspectives and insights of various Christian traditions, along with critically-evaluated postmodern epistemology [sic] ideas: a holistic approach to the knowledge of God offered principally by evangelicals scholars emulating and building on the lead of Lesslie Newbigin – scholars of the *tradition-conserving reformist* and *conservative tradition-reforming* varieties' (270).

Several criticisms may be levelled against the work. A major drawback is the contention throughout that postconservatives are almost all Arminian, inclusivist, and not from a reformed background. Despite this claim some of the key figures of postconservatism which Sherman upholds include such *reformed* thinkers as Alister McGrath, Donald Bloesch, Stanley Grenz, Kevin Vanhoozer, and even Lesslie Newbigin! Concomitant with this claim is an incorrect perpetuation of what the reformers meant by *sola scriptura* and an obvious predilection for open theism. It is here that the main criticism of the work surfaces. Sherman overlooks one of the main epistemologies being developed today, that of critical realism. While McGrath is appealed to there is no mention of his three volume *Scientific Theology* in which he develops

one of the most rigorous studies on evangelical epistemology centred around critical realism. This is a significant weakness of the work considering the work not only of McGrath but N.T. Wright, Thomas Torrance, and a host of others who are developing this methodology and epistemology. Sherman appeals to Polanyi and his influence on Newbigin but didn't extend this discussion to investigate more rigorously how Polanyi has been utilised by numerous theologians to construct a postfoundationalist epistemology that differs in many respects from that offered by Sherman.

These biases may alienate Sherman's work from much of the North American context of evangelicalism he wishes address. Additionally, no index was supplied which is always an annoying omission, numerous spelling errors marred the work, and several key works published over the past few years were not interacted with, most notably Vanhoozer's 2005 monograph *The Drama of Doctrine*. Not surprisingly such a work will not find universal acceptance within evangelicalism. As Sherman states, 'How one views these shifts – as *revitalizing* evangelical theology or *raising* it – likely reveals one's inclination for postconservatism or traditionalism, respectively' (250). Or maybe it reveals agreement or disagreement with Sherman's reading of postconservatism.

This is a stimulating work which is generally well researched, written, and presented. Sherman presents in an easily digestible format the contours of much evangelical scholarship over recent years and presents an admirable argument as to why some form of postfoundationalist/ nonfoundationalist epistemology currently reigns supreme in philosophy and increasingly in theological epistemology, especially amongst younger evangelicals, or reformists as Sherman calls them. Sherman is especially adept in presenting the postconservative theological epistemology of the mainly Arminian postconservative evangelical scholars such as Pinnock. Sherman's 'revitalized' proposal for evangelical hermeneutics is well made and deserves a wide reading.

**Myk Habets**