

BOOK REVIEWS

***Embedded Genres in the New Testament: Understanding Their Impact for Interpretation.* By Jeannine Brown. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024, 145 pp., \$24.99.**

Jeannine Brown in her work, *Embedded Genres in the New Testament*, analyzes genres within their literary framework yielding relevant, interpretive insights. Jeannine Brown serves as the David Price Professor of Biblical and Theological Foundations at Bethel Seminary. She is the author of *Scripture and Communication*, *The Gospel as Stories*, as well as commentaries on Matthew and Philippians. Her work in hermeneutics and genre provides the impetus for this monograph—her purpose: to engender sensitivity to embedded genres by investigating three test cases in the New Testament.

In Chapter 2 (7-48), Brown examines a *potential* embedded genre of poetry within Philippians. The nature of poetry in the first century is discussed first, followed by an investigation into the macrolevel and microlevel structures of the passage, 2:6-11. In a detailed comparison of poetic lines, the author teases out poetic envelopes, patterns, and repetitions. The micro-level conventions identified—parataxis, alternating conjunctions, and parallelism—help in determining four sets of parallel lines. Brown then points out the biblical author's concise, particular language choices. All of this to show that the embedded poetic genre is transformed by the letter genre according to contextual emphases. In other words, Paul's placement of the poem underscores his paraenetic, persuasive aim, and by moving to poetry, Paul invites a whole-person response (46).

In Chapter 3 (49-82), the author examines a riddle embedded within Matthew's Gospel narrative. An overview is given concerning the use of riddles in ancient times pointing out the requirements of (1) ambiguity and (2) interrogative sense. Matthew signals the presence of riddles through the speakers and audience within the narrative. Brown singles out a "riddle session" when Jesus is questioned (21:23-22:46), a passage comprised of

initial dueling questions, two son parables, and three trick questions in rapid succession. In the final riddle, Jesus provides a cryptic answer to the question that began the initial riddle. The interrogative significance of identifying this “riddle” genre embedded in a narrative is that the narrative story line potentially makes the riddle “less riddle-like” (78). Jesus is an expert riddler, and Matthew demonstrates the Christological truth of Jesus as sage and embodiment of divine wisdom.

In Chapter 4 (83-120), a description of the prominence and purpose of the household code in 1 Peter is discussed in light of Greco-Roman domestic codes. Brown draws out the “marked” features—those elements that defy the normal parameters expected in household codes—and “unmarked” features—those elements that align with typical household codes. The embedded genre and framework send a clear message that any offensive behavior should only arise from their complete allegiance to Christ (115). Hermeneutically, the impact of the household code on the letter is analyzed as well as the impact of the letter on the household code—a bidirectional observation.

In the final pages (124-26), the author encourages exploration: to be sensitive to subtle movements between the micro and macro genres, which can bring forth interpretive insights. The author accomplishes her goal by sifting out possible semantic valences of an embedded genre within a larger whole to determine meaning. The book is not exhaustive; rather, it is didactic, comparable to three extended lectures that engage the reader and offer the interpreter relevant vocabulary and considerations to aid in interpretation. In essence, Brown’s book adds precision to one or more of the traditional exegetical steps in the hermeneutical process.

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God, vol. 1, Theology for Every Person. By Malcolm B. Yarnell III. Brentwood, TN: B&H, 2024, 272 pp., \$24.99.

Why is it necessary to have another systematic theology? Yarnell, research professor of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, draws upon the comprehension and ethos of the systematic theology of his mentor James Leo Garrett Jr. (1925-2020). Yarnell, following Garrett, continues

the theological pedigree of Southwestern Seminary initiated by Walter Thomas Connor (1877-1952). Yarnell identifies his institutional purpose at the end of the book: “I write these volumes to make Southwestern Seminary’s classical empowering theology more accessible to all the people of God” (250).

In accord with his mentor’s hope as well as his, i.e., that the people of God would grow “through good doctrine and ethics,” Yarnell’s delicate and humble effort is clearly displayed through a vivid picture of the whole biblical and theological flow of doctrinal description so that every person can enjoy entering the life of God to see the glory of God. Moreover, he shows aesthetically how colloquial terms perfectly fit the technical conceptions of theology in a balanced manner. In other words, the frame and reader-friendly terms of his conversational style make theology approachable for those who seek to understand the biblical basis, historical interpretation, and theological significance of each doctrine. At the same time, however, it is fascinating to read the author’s mindset. Yarnell’s wording simultaneously conveys a biblical conciseness and theological thickness.

Two prominent aspects among many other encouraging points in the system of the book include the Trinity and the Bible. Firstly, throughout the whole book, Yarnell’s writing resonates with reverence toward the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Based on the paradoxical but wonderfully harmonious attributes of God the Trinity as pure act, e.g., of God’s transcendence and immanence, and of divine holiness, divine love, and divine righteousness, his system points toward God in ontology and economy.

An example of Yarnell’s emphasis on God the Trinity is seen in his construction of a “Trinitarian Model of Revelation” (133). Yarnell continues his Trinitarian “theology of Scripture” with a “Trinitarian economy of revelation” and a “Logos-Pneuma Ontology of Scripture” (204). His preferred model of revelation is offered only after reviewing the famous six models of revelation by Avery Dulles.

Secondly, Yarnell explicates the core truths of Christianity through surveying the whole biblical narrative and through concise reflections upon relevant individual Scripture texts. He thereby avoids the typical and sometimes unhelpful way of delivering and arranging theology as a series of abstractions. He also avoids incorporating unnecessary arguments in systematic theology. For example, throughout the entire section on special revelation, the reader can dive immediately into the full-orbed gospel of

God revolving around Jesus Christ the Lord and Savior through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The most interesting aspect of Yarnell's system is the structure of volume one, which illuminates his own mature theological methodology. How should one approach God the Trinity and the revelation of God in Scripture? Contrary to many evangelical systematic theologies, God deals first with God the Trinity and then with Scripture. Yarnell provides his full rationale for beginning God's story with God Himself later in the book:

Yet I also intentionally place Scripture after our exposition of God the Trinity and his attributes, thereby reasserting the supremacy of God as Trinity over his elect means of revelation. This method retains the benefits of the other methods while equally recognizing the Father sending the Son and the Spirit, and the leading roles of both the divine Word and the divine Spirit in Scripture. I, therefore, locate the ontology of Scripture in the Trinitarian economy through its dependence upon the God who is and who acts as *Logos*, "Word," and *Pneuma*, "Spirit" (202-203).

This reviewer finds Yarnell's argument persuasive. If the purpose of a theological method is to better explain God, his Word, and his will for his people, this method seems more legitimate. Placing God first is biblically rooted, for "God" simply is before he acts (cf. Gen. 1:1). This method is also contextually perceptive, correcting modern ignorance about theology proper.

Theologians have the privilege of knowing and studying God through his revelation. At the same time, they have the responsibility to pass the right understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ to following generations. If the theological statement, "every Christian is a theologian," is justifiable, and it is, then all the people of God have this same privilege and responsibility. We must all be concerned to proclaim, "good doctrine and ethics." Yarnell has begun to accomplish his primary goal in the first volume of the trilogy entitled, "Theology for Every Person."

I highly recommend this first volume of Yarnell's popular-level systematic theology, *God*. It invites you into the "Grand Tour," wherein you encounter the Triune God and his revelation and wherein you can

begin exploring the marvelous world that he created, is redeeming, and will bring to his chosen end.

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Cultural Sanctification: Engaging the World like the Early Church.
By Stephen O. Presley. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024, 220 pp.,
\$24.99.

Christians today are faced with an opportunity to discern how to respond to an increasingly hostile pagan culture in the West. Amid this juncture, it is easy to perceive that the best way forward is either to enact the Pope Benedict option by withdrawing from society or take up arms in the culture war. In his latest work, *Cultural Sanctification*, Stephen Presley offers a mediating solution to this discussion recognizing that Christendom has fallen in the West, and – in referencing Charles Taylor – a secular age has replaced it. Despite this cultural and religious transition, Christians have a fresh opportunity to represent Christ amid a hostile environment. Presley concludes that, rather than withdrawing from the culture or resorting to an aggressive confrontative posture, Christians should look to the ancient wisdom found in the early church, which faced a similarly hostile culture that believers are engulfed in today. Presley accomplishes this by drawing from early church voices such as Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Augustine, and others, each demonstrating the process of cultural sanctification. *Cultural Sanctification* is a masterful and much needed contribution that adds to the engagement provided by, most relevantly, Carl Trueman in *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. This work functions as a practical addendum to Trueman's robust historical accounting.

Presley is a senior fellow for religion and public life at the Center for Religion, Culture, and Democracy and associate professor of church history at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Along with his proficient work on Irenaeus in *The Intertextual Reception of Genesis 1-3*, Presley has contributed heavily to the patristic field through his numerous works and interactions that seek to provide wisdom to modern Christians by recovering the ancient wisdom of the early church. This same focus is the aim of his newest contribution, *Cultural Sanctification: Engaging the*

World like the Early Church.

Presley delineates the early church's cultural sanctification by observing its identity, citizenship, and public engagement. In the first chapter of this volume, Presley posits how the early church developed a distinctly Christian identity both theologically and morally through catechesis and liturgy (40-54). A healthy Christian identity naturally led to an appropriate response through a sound political theology and public engagement. In chapters two and three, Presley asserts that the early church maintained the scriptural balance of honoring the governmental authorities yet remaining faithful to their Christian identity (63). This was coupled with the early church's robust public intellectual contributions, notably exemplified by the second-century apologists (105).

The public engagement of the early church did not remain merely intellectual. In chapter four, Presley extends his notations about the early church's public engagement to its emphasis on holiness, as represented by the early believer's willingness to serve their neighbors in practical yet discerning ways (121). Despite Presley's despairing yet correct conclusions about the current culture made at the outset of his work, his final two chapters serve as a reminder of the hope Christians have in the gospel of Jesus. Despite the loss of many of the West's strong Christian institutions, this should never cause believers to despair (165).

Presley's most decisive contribution to the conversation surrounding the conundrum of an increasingly hostile culture is his encouragement for Christians to uphold a strong identity that derives from robust participation in the local church. The early church recognized the need for intense modes of catechesis and liturgy that functioned as the foundation for a proper response to Rome's pagan ethos. As Presley rightly remarks, spiritual formation through the local church led to the enactment of a rule of faith that sought the coming of the glory of God rather than the glory of Rome (49). Rightly so, the church is ground zero for Christians to begin the process of cultural sanctification.

A profound characteristic of Presley's work is how he encourages believers not to fall into despair because of Christ's hopeful return. However, readers might conclude that – given the demise of Christendom – there is no longer a hope in the West for any form of Christian society to return. While a simple return to the past is not the proper solution, Presley's work might benefit from considering a more hopeful future for the West. Notably, if Christians participate in cultural sanctification, it will offer

an opportunity to rehabilitate the West, given the faithfulness of God's people. That is not to say this outcome is guaranteed, yet the remnant remains of the Christian West persists, and a better future is possible.

In writing *Cultural Sanctification*, Presley has provided Christians with a beautiful gift to both the layperson and academic. Yet it is perhaps most relevant to pastors across the West who are faced with opportunities to counsel their congregants as they struggle with how to live Christianly in a secular age. As Presley admits, retrieving the ancient wisdom of the early church does not automatically solve every cultural issue under the sun. Nevertheless, it strengthens the resolve and solidifies the church's distinctly Christian identity. It also puts in perspective that, even if the culture remains in darkness, Christians can live with hope while participating in the public square consistent with a faithful witness for the benefit of the church and to the glory of God.

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***Creation and Christian Ethics: Understanding God's Designs for Humanity and the World.* By Dennis P. Hollinger. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023, 304 pp., \$29.99.**

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Old Testament theology began to pay more attention to creation accounts. It grounds the Old Testament law on creation as Walter Brueggemann states in his *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1997. Bruce Waltke also states the creation narratives undergird the Ten Commandments (*An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach*, 2007). John Goldingay explains how broadly the creation order impacts legal ethics (*Old Testament Theology*, volume 3, *Israel's Life*, 2009). Christopher Wright also asserts a connection between creation and Israelite law (*Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 2004). Now Dennis P. Hollinger, president emeritus and senior distinguished professor of Christian ethics at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, follows this pattern to place the creation story as the foundation of the Christian ethics.

In the Introduction, "Why Creation for Ethics," creation is based on Genesis 1-2. It is about the character of the world and its implications.

The reasons to start the discussion of Christian ethics with creation are five-fold: The biblical story is incomplete without creation; creation is a central theme throughout Scripture; the doctrine of the Trinity is related to creation; the final new creation is a renewing of what God created in the beginning; and finally, creation is full of salient ethical themes. Then in Chapter 1, "In the Beginning God," Hollinger explains God loves humans, designed the whole universe, and spoke to create the universe and reveal Himself in nature and in the written and living Word. This is the fundamental concept for creation ethics.

"It's a Good World After All" is the title of Chapter 2, where money, sex, and power, traps of Christian ministry, are declared as good gifts of God, but one needs to experience redemption in Christ and live by the power of the Holy Spirit to not misuse them to dishonor God who created them.

Chapter 3, "Made in the Image of God," explains the value and dignity of humans. The dignity of all people should avoid racism and ethnocentrism. Dignity in the whole of life should be applied to the issues of abortion and euthanasia. Hollinger clearly states human worth and dignity are not based on one's attributes, functions, or assessment by others.

In Chapter 4, "Creation Care," the worldviews of anthropocentrism, biocentrism, and theocentrism are compared and discussed. The author explains the biblical view of theocentric foundations beginning with the creation story in Genesis 1-2, then from the rest of Scripture. This chapter ends with suggestions on how to care for God's creation.

"Created for Relationship" has two chapters. Part 1 is about sexuality, marriage, sex, and family (Chapter 5). The first time that something is not good is about the singleness of Adam (Gen. 2:18). In discussing the current issues, the author differentiates between Christian ethics, pastoral care, and public policy. Pastoral care should have love, understanding, and empathy for a person who is not normal. In public policy, although the rights of transgender people should be protected, the rights of all individuals should be protected, too. Hollinger emphasizes marriage has a creation paradigm. Egalitarian marriage is consistent with the creation pattern, but the same-sex union is not. In discussing physical intimacy, sexual acts should be for Christians an act of spiritual intimacy that nurtures and deepens their relationship with God.

Part 2 of "Created for Relationship" includes other major institutions: the church, education, the media, leisure, economics, and government (Chapter 6). Hollinger asks for wisdom, prayer, and conversation with

other Christians to reach an ethical stand in this complex world. He classifies Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC as propaganda agencies, not news stations. He states that a market (not command) economy is our least fallen choice. He argues, contrary to St. Augustine, that government is needed even if there is no human fall.

Chapter 7, “Created to Work,” explains the biblical perspective on work. Hollinger connects work with the creation story and the rest of the biblical story. He points out that Adam’s fall impacts the meaning of work, lays the theological foundation for the work ethic, and discusses work’s ethical principles and virtues. God instituting the “Sabbath” into a rhythm of life for worship, self-care, and justice is the topic of Chapter 8. The emphasis is not on the specific day but on the principles. Hollinger begins with the Sabbath and the Decalogue and discusses all the relevant passages in the Scripture. He comments on the different views on the Sabbath in the church’s history and says it does not affect the underlying principles. Finally, he details the ethical implications of the Sabbath commandment for today.

The penultimate chapter on human finitude goes from the creation story to the rest of the Scriptures to demonstrate that we are “limited and dependent” beings, on others and God. The fall is a rejection of finitude. Hollinger concludes with implications of human finitude for ethical issues of utopias, eugenics, transhumanism, and euthanasia. Accepting our finitude does not mean accepting the status quo, or against advancement to better human life, but staying within the confines of God’s design.

The final chapter summarizes the philosophical underpinning of the Christian ethic, human beings are “embodied souls or ensouled bodies.” Hollinger accepts both and connects them to the creation story. He develops the ethical implications in evangelism and social concern, artificial intelligence and the technicization of humans, and virtual gatherings for worship and work. He decries the ubiquitousness of technology, rejects virtual worship, and concludes we can never revert to a purely material approach to life or a purely spiritual approach.

In the short conclusion, Hollinger emphasizes the importance of living out a creation ethic in a pluralistic, complex, and fallen world. He dislikes the withdrawal or defiance model, and criticizes conservative or progressive Christians; instead, he advocates a faithful presence model, proposed by James Hunter. We must build a bridge to get a hearing on the creation ethics. Overall, this is a very good book on Christian ethics. Each

chapter has its conclusion, which is helpful. Compared to Ken Magnuson's *Invitation to Christian Ethics*, this book does not give details in countering non-biblical positions. Magnuson's is suitable as a textbook, and this book as a supplemental reading. This book accepts egalitarian marriage but does not comment on Eve being created as a helper to complement Adam. Regarding creation as the foundation of ethics, it is not clearly stated in the creation account, but only by implications. It is possible to build evangelical ethics on a broader basis, Oliver O'Donovan builds it on the created order, eschatology and history, and knowledge in Christ.

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***Criswell: His Life and Times.* By O. S. Hawkins. Brentwood, TN: B&H Publishing, 2024. 241 pp., \$27.99.**

There arose a generation who did not know W. A. Criswell. Most of my current students have never heard of this once-famous, highly influential Southern Baptist pastor. He is special to me because I was saved, licensed, and ordained under his ministry at First Baptist Church of Dallas. So, I welcome this biography of Criswell by O. S. Hawkins, chancellor and senior professor of pastoral ministry and evangelism at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Hawkins had a unique relationship with Criswell, being his chosen successor (xiii, 64, 172, 224) and enjoying a friendship and mentorship that spanned decades (xii). Criswell was pastor at First Baptist Dallas for 50 years (1944-94, the last 4 years overlapping with Gregory and Hawkins), followed by Joel Gregory (1990-92) and O. S. Hawkins (1993-1997). Hawkins served as President/CEO of Guidestone Financial Resources from 1997 until his retirement in 2022.

This book is a sequel to Hawkin's book *In the Name of God: The Colliding Lives, Legends, and Legacies of J. Frank Norris and George W. Truett*, recalling the influence both prominent pastors had on Criswell. Hawkins gleaned much information from the Oral History Project at Baylor University about Criswell's admiration of Norris's passion and pathos in preaching (2, 4, 36). Most of this enjoyable book is a decade-by-decade, 1940s-90s, description of Criswell's accomplishments along with many interesting

stories of this larger-than-life pastor. Hawkins does well in setting the tone of each decade by mentioning prominent people and events in the United States (29, 74-75, 128-31).

Four emphases throughout the book can engage, enlighten, and inspire the reader, as a good Christian biography should do. First, Criswell's fiery expository preaching was based on his love of the Bible and his zeal for sharing the gospel. His favorite verse was Isaiah 40:8 (230). Second, the providential hand of God was evident throughout Criswell's life. He never dated a girl until late at seminary, when he met and married Betty Harris, his long-time helpmate (57-59). Each pastorate came about through a series of unusual events, including Betty telegraphing FBC Dallas that W. A. would preach there one Sunday after he explicitly told her that he would not do so (34, 80). His vivid dreams (visions?) of being told by Truett to be his successor and then years later being told that Hawkins should be Criswell's successor are certainly intriguing (64, 84-85, 223). Third, Anna Criswell's strong guidance of W. A. through college shows the positive influence of a godly mother who sacrificed for her sons (19-33). She influenced him to be open to God using women in ministry, and he strongly supported women on staff at FBC Dallas (106-10, 113). Fourth, Hawkins mentions some of Criswell's idiosyncrasies and regrets, devoting chapter 13 to the latter, showing that Criswell was a sinner saved by God's grace.

Here are some additional positive features. The chapter on Criswell's support of Jewish people and modern Israel and how this fits with his dispensational premillennial eschatology was especially insightful (189-204). Hawkins makes good use of humor throughout the book (17, 178, 201, 228), such as a quotation from the "Wheelbarrow Sermon" (147). Some anecdotes are especially moving and make great sermon illustrations, such as when pastor John Hicks on his deathbed lamented having an insignificant ministry, but he evidently forgot about a revival service he preached long ago in Texline when young Criswell got saved and told Hicks, "I'm going to be a preacher" (22-23). As a student at Baylor University, Criswell went after classes each day to preach in an impoverished area along the Brazos River called Sand Town (38). Criswell's spontaneous song one day on the lawn of Mullins Hall at Southern Seminary touched the heart of student Paul Crandall. He was going to quit seminary but reconsidered after hearing Criswell sing "It Pays to Serve Jesus" (56).

Hawkins is an excellent preacher and an engaging writer, as was Criswell. While noting some Criswellian tendencies to exaggeration or overstatement

(170, fn. 20), Hawkins occasionally enjoys the same practice, as many pastors do (70, 80, 113, 165, 218). Some stories in the book are repeated, such as the selling of the Criswell antiques, including a set of China owned by Adolf Hitler (69, 103-04, 221), and stating that contrary to Criswell's claim of innovating the age-graded Sunday School, it was Norris who did so twenty years earlier (89, 112-13). An index and the addition of photographs, especially from Criswell's early years, would have been a welcome addition to this volume, yet the publisher precluded them. However, none of these minor shortcomings detract from this engaging biography.

Since Criswell was a longtime pastor at an important church, there are many memorable stories about him. No doubt people who knew him have favorite anecdotes they wish were included in this volume, but its purpose was not to be comprehensive. This book is an enjoyable and insightful description of a highly influential evangelical pastor in the second half of the twentieth century, admirably written by one of his successors. Students, pastors, and laypeople will benefit from reading this inspiring volume. Criswell might have put it like this, "Ah, lad, ten thousand times ten thousand thanksgivings for your profoundly reverential and magnificently benevolent biography, but beware what you say about Betty."

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