

Book Reviews

Speaking with Bold Assurance. By Bert Decker and Hershael W. York. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001, 184 pp., \$14.99, paper.

In this book the authors attempt to provide skills and strategies that will enable the Christian more effectively to communicate the truth of God. They are quite successful in carrying out their assignment.

The book is a quick and crisp thirty-one chapters, many consisting of just two-to-five pages. Each is well written and informative. "The Nine Behavioral Skills" (section IV, chapters 11-19) of effective communication adapted from Decker's earlier work, *You've Got to Be Believed to Be Heard*, is worth the price of the book alone. Anyone who is serious about becoming the best Christian communicator possible, building on his or her unique individual personality, will benefit from the insights Decker and York provide. Their challenge to have "a passion for constant improvement" (p. 161) is one every preacher and teacher should heed, and their call for constant and honest feedback is an important word far too many preachers neglect. Just when was the last time one of your messages was really critiqued for strengths and weaknesses, plusses and minuses by someone who would tell you the truth; even if it hurt?! My appreciation for this book is such that I will be using it as one of my texts in the class, "Ministry of Proclamation," and I would encourage others to con-

sider it as well.

There are a couple of things that I believe our authors could have done that would have improved the book. The alternating of "he" and "she" pronouns throughout was distracting and unnecessary. There is no footnoting, neither is there a bibliography. It would be helpful to know the source of their ideas, and who the others are in the field of communication theory and what they are saying. There is some repetition of subject matter that does not really add anything. Finally, "The Decker Grid System" (section V, chapters 20-25), though an interesting and potentially helpful device for composing a message, suffers in my judgment at two points. First, I believe it makes the process appear more simple than it really is, especially the time one must invest for effective communication of biblical truth. Second and more important, I am not sure it will work in doing biblical exposition. I was not surprised to find that the illustrating of the method did not show how to expound Scripture or even develop a Christian message. It should be noted here that Decker and York are currently working on another volume: *Preaching with Bold Assurance*. Perhaps in this work they will show how the "Decker Grid System" applies to biblical exposition, or they will show us that different types of speaking require different methods of preparation, and that the "Decker Grid System" and the biblical expositor simply travel along different

preparation roads following different preparation maps as they compose their messages.

This book is a practical and proven method in how to improve as a public speaker. Those who follow its principles will gain a greater confidence when they stand up to speak, and they will deliver their message with a greater clarity and effectiveness. In the age in which we live the preacher and teacher of God's word must remember: "What we say is more important than how we say it, but how we say it has never been more important." Decker and York will help all of us say it better.

Daniel L. Akin

Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World? By Terrance Tiessen. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000, 400 pp., \$18.99, paper.

Every few years a theological book comes out that is written with such comprehensiveness and clarity that it becomes a classic text in the field for years to come. *Providence and Prayer* could be just such a magisterial text.

Terrance Tiessen, professor of theology and ethics at Providence Theological Seminary in Manitoba, Canada, is the book's author. He surveys ten different theological models to describe God's providence: semi-deism, process theology, free-will theism, church dominion theology, the redemptive intervention model, Molinist middle knowledge,

Thomism, Barthian neo-orthodoxy, Calvinist middle knowledge, Calvinism, and Fatalism. The author describes how representatives of each of these positions approach petitionary prayer and the doctrine of providence. The descriptions of each view are written with clarity and insight in a thorough and evenhanded presentation. Tiessen concludes each chapter with a helpful case study about a prayer group that is requested to pray for a missionary who has been abducted by terrorists. Through the case studies Tiessen applies how advocates of each of the theological approaches would frame the missionary abduction, how they would agree or disagree with those representing other views of providence, and how they would word a prayer for the missionary. Through the methodology of the case studies Tiessen compares and contrasts these theological approaches not only in the abstract, but also in a real life situation. The book also has a helpful glossary, bibliography, indexes, and chart of the various views, in addition to thorough documentation in footnotes.

Tiessen presents each view graciously and fairly, from the pens of its own advocates. One could quibble with Tiessen's selection of which models to examine in the book. Church dominion theology may deserve to be included because of its influence in popular piety, but its paucity of scholarly advocates makes it rather uneven with the other chapters. The chapter on Barth seemed unnecessary since there were already two other chapters on Calvinistic

views, and because Barthian theology has few advocates in popular piety or among conservative evangelical, mainstream, or liberal theologians. Other twentieth century theologians such as Paul Tillich and Langdon Gilkey have more interesting things to say about providence and human destiny. Including a chapter on fatalism is questionable because Tiessen himself acknowledges that no major contemporary theologians advocate this position (p. 272). The primary motivation for including the chapter on fatalism seems to have been to provide a framework to defend Calvinism against the charge that Reformed theology reduces to fatalism, and thus might have more logically been included in the material on Calvinism. Despite these reservations, each chapter makes for interesting reading and affords a distinctive approach to the doctrine of providence. The models that Tiessen examines do provide a helpful spectrum of approaches to these issues.

The author reserves most of his evaluation of other views until he reveals his own Calvinist middle knowledge view. Tiessen presents his view as the last perspective to be examined, but theologially it actually falls in the spectrum of views between Thomism and Barthianism on one side and Calvinism on the other side. In his own approach Tiessen attempts to hold together two seemingly incompatible approaches: Calvinism and Molinism. From Calvinism he draws the convictions that God is in total control of all events, and that humans have only compatibilist (not libertarian) freedom.

From Molinism he draws the conviction that God has both simple foreknowledge and middle knowledge. But by holding these two strange bedfellows together, Tiessen introduces tensions into his perspective. He denies the Calvinist doctrines of immutability and impassibility, opting instead for a view of God being responsive to his creation. At the same time, he denies human libertarian freewill, which is assumed in most middle knowledge approaches. Because God has middle knowledge of the future actions of humans with predictable compatibilist freedom, he can adjust providence to appear to be responsive to human petitions. Tiessen affirms that we should offer petitionary prayer not because it changes things or causes God to change things, but because it was already part of God's sovereign decree that we should do so.

Providence and Prayer compels the reader to think about what he or she believes concerning these aspects of the doctrine of God. Since I would identify myself within the Molinist middle knowledge position, I share many points of agreement with Tiessen's Calvinist middle knowledge perspective. Tiessen's affirmation of the sovereignty of God squares well with the biblical witness. He correctly argues that divine foreknowledge does not require reverse causation. Tiessen recognizes that both God's special and general providence are an expression of God's providential care, and thus aptly does not fall into the trap of defining miracles as violations of the laws of nature. God is Lord over nature, not

an invader of an alien world. He who creates the laws of nature is not bound by the laws of nature.

Having surveyed nine competing views and then proposing a novel alternative, a seasoned scholar such as Tiessen will be cognizant that such an approach is to invite criticism from all sides, particularly since his perspective is not a majoritarian view. I would raise several areas of concern in Tiessen's perspective. First, he seems to be confused at points between *indeterminism*, the perspective that events at the subatomic level are random and unpredictable, and *incompatibilism* (or self-determinism), the view that persons choose their own actions by an exercise of libertarian freewill. Advocates of libertarian freedom would agree (not disagree) with Tiessen's remarks about the danger of applying the Heisenberg principle of indeterminacy to human behavior, since human behavior is accounted for not by randomness but by agent causation. Thus some of Tiessen's arguments which he directs against libertarian freedom may actually apply to indeterminism, but have no force against incompatibilism.

Tiessen unfortunately insists that human action is an all-or-nothing, either-or situation. Either the person's action was determined by prior causes and reasons which may be accurately predicted, or the person's action was merely random or arbitrary (pp. 313-314). The only two options he permits are thus hard determinism or hard indeterminism. But he simply begs the question by not providing an adequate answer to

the proposal of Norman Geisler and others of a robust self-determinism (pp. 187-188, 246-247). As Norman Geisler correctly points out, Tiessen's perspective confuses efficient causality with final causality. The reason that one acts is the efficient but not the final cause of an agent's action. The reason for action alone obviously cannot bring about the action. For example, a person's desire to have a Jaguar motor car is not sufficient to cause the purchase of the vehicle, as desire-belief psychology might suggest. Ultimately, the personal agent must weigh the reasons and make an informed judgment, which might even cut against his or her own desires.

Tiessen acknowledges that humans are created in God's image (p. 327) with the "power of self-determinacy" (p. 291). He even acknowledges that God is not the only agent, but created angelic and human beings to be self-determining agents (p. 291). He even affirms "double agency" in which not only God but also humans "have genuine agency" (pp. 91, 292). Unfortunately, Tiessen does not seem to grasp the consequence of these admissions. Since he denies that humans share a creaturely, finite version of God's libertarian free agency, Tiessen is stuck on the horns of his own creation. Either God does not have libertarian freewill (but instead has a limited compatibilist freedom similar to humans such that He is bound to act according to His character and to reasons outside of Himself), or God makes libertarian decisions without reasons in a totally arbitrary and ran-

dom fashion. These are the only alternatives Tiessen allows for human agents; so why do they not apply to the Divine Agent in whose image they were created? If Tiessen can acknowledge that "God is love, and we are called upon to be loving, after his image and his example" (p. 327), why does he not recognize the parallel in human agency? If God's agency means that he can originate an action without any external forces exerted upon him, why would human agency not follow that same pattern? Tiessen's radical bifurcation between human agents and the divine Agent appears to make his proposal untenable.

Tiessen also acknowledges the distinction between primary and secondary causes, but functionally he reduces all events to God's sovereign decree. He attempts to avoid the charge that human decisions are illusory by appeal to a compatibilist account in which actions are seen as free so long as humans are not coerced into doing them, but act voluntarily, consistent with their own desires (p. 365). Nonetheless, he repeatedly affirms that God is the only real cause, because human "agents" act only for reasons and causes prior to themselves. He uses primarily Old Testament Scriptures in affirming that God causes all things. Tiessen does not address the issue of why the polytheistic context of the Old Testament made it imperative to emphasize God's sovereignty and monotheistic uniqueness rather than secondary causes. While the New Testament continues to affirm the sovereignty of God and proclaim

his ultimate victory, it expounds and enriches the Old Testament accounts by distinguishing more clearly God's activity as primary cause from the activity of human and spiritual beings as secondary causes. The better hermeneutic would take seriously the points at which the New Testament informs and completes Old Testament theology.

By affirming that God is responsive to his creation rather than being a mere impassive observer, Tiessen seeks to avoid the trap that befalls some Calvinists and has created a cottage industry for freewill theists. This affirmation further strains Tiessen's consistency, however, when he also affirms that God is in control of all things. If humans do not have libertarian freedom, just how much adjustment would be required by God? If human actions are almost mechanically predictable as Tiessen suggests, then God's actions would be more like prescribed and predetermined plans along the lines of a computer chess program than as genuine personal responses to the human beings. At the least, the author does not give us reason to conclude otherwise.

There seems to be a logical error in Tiessen's discussion of fatalism, in which he identifies Stoicism as the primary example of fatalism. He seems to think that if he can establish that Calvinism is distinguishable from Stoicism, he can relieve it of the charge of fatalism. So the argument goes as follows: (a) Stoicism is a form of fatalism; (b) Calvinism is not Stoicism; (c) Therefore, Calvinism is not fatalism. This argument commits the

logical fallacy of denying the antecedent. Fatalism is obviously more comprehensive than Stoicism. Tiessen also seems to conflate "fatalistic" and "fatalism." Doctrines can be fatalistic if they share some common themes with fatalism, but not accept all aspects of fatalism. Tiessen thus has more work to do if he wants to relieve Calvinism of its alleged connection with fatalism. The starting place for an answer must be that fatalism is normally an impersonal series of events, whereas Christianity explains history as a series of events overseen by a Person. While Tiessen recognizes the value of a personalistic image of God (p. 311), he unfortunately appears to agree with the assertions of naturalistic and postmodern anthropologists that humans are merely the contingent products of previous causal events. Tiessen agrees with William Pollard that the "I" of the person "is controlled by things and instincts, the product of its given heredity and environment" (p. 247). The event causation account of human action advocated by Tiessen is deterministic, if not fatalistic.

In his effort to be responsive to freewill theism, Tiessen presents an unsatisfying account of divine providence. On the one hand, Tiessen advocates a no-risk view of divine providence. He claims that "God is realizing his intention at every point" (p. 295), controlling "every detail" (p. 330), and that "God is completely in control at all times so that the accomplishment of his purposes is never at risk" (p. 332). On the other hand, Tiessen also claims that God

does not act coercively, and he disapproves of some actions that take place. For Tiessen, God "*always* acts in loving persuasion and *never* coercively" (p. 314, italics mine); "[t]he biblical record leaves us in no doubt that people often resist God's persuasive work and grieve him in so doing" (p. 314); and humans "*normally* choose what they do without external constraint" (p. 331, italics mine). How can these apparently contradictory claims be reconciled? Tiessen can't have it both ways—either God is in control or he is not! According to Tiessen's proposal, how could God always uncoercively persuade people? Tiessen's own definition of compatibilist freedom is that people are free when they act "voluntarily, spontaneously or willingly, without coercion by anything outside themselves" (p. 365). If our future actions are already determined and predictable by our character and desires, how could God change us without forcing such a change on us? Not only is Tiessen's model of divine persuasion reminiscent of process theology, but his ambiguous treatment of universalism (pp. 302, 312) and his rejection of divine timelessness (pp. 321-331) reflect troubling similarities with process theology and freewill theism.

One intuition underlying Tiessen's approach seems to be that suffering people most need to believe that God is in control. But suffering people not only need to believe that God is in control, but also that God cares. Tiessen's retreat to mystery as an account for human suffering, and his decision not to deal with the problem of evil

in this book, offers at best incomplete answers to those who suffer. But when he insists that “Satan and the demons are never able to act contrary to God’s sovereign purpose” and that “[e]ven in their evil action they accomplish the will of God” (p. 311), Tiessen creates enormous theodicy problems for which there must be some accounting to offer a coherent theology.

Tiessen’s approach to divine foreknowledge is also rather muddled. He rightly acknowledges that divine foreknowledge does not count as a case of reverse causation, because foreknowledge is not causally connected to the events that follow. He agrees with the Molinist middle knowledge doctrine that God can know actual events chosen by individuals with libertarian freedom. But Tiessen parts company with the Molinist account about counterfactuals. Since he refuses to consider agent causation and insists that libertarian freedom requires random, unpredictable, arbitrary choices, Tiessen asserts that “precognition of libertarianly free actions is not possible even for God” (p. 331). God only knows future human actions because he knows human character and past and present actions (pp. 317, 345, 405-406), but Tiessen asserts that for God to know counterfactuals of libertarianly free persons is “incoherent” (p. 317). To utilize the distinction suggested by Paul Helm, Tiessen denies O-foreknowledge, the view that God can know an event ahead of time without bringing it about, but accepts a variety of A-foreknowledge, in which God foreknows by virtue of

the fact that he has ordained or ensured that the event will come to place (p. 252). Setting aside for the moment Tiessen’s rigid refusal to consider agent causation as a mediating point between hard determinism and vacuous indeterminism, why would this all-knowing God suddenly get amnesia when confronted with libertarian freewill? Why would the existence of human libertarian freewill be a challenge to the foreknowledge and omniscience of an eternal God of infinite knowledge and wisdom? Tiessen never presents a clear argument as to why foreknowledge of libertarianly free creatures is so far beyond God’s grasp.

In the final analysis, what distinguishes various views of providence is where to put mystery. Semi-deists try to eliminate mystery. Freewill theists and process theologians remove mystery from divine foreknowledge, and place it in the future instead. A Molinist middle knowledge advocate can affirm but not explain how an omniscient God could have exhaustive foreknowledge of what creatures with libertarian freedom will do. How divine election and human freewill can work concurrently is bound up in the mystery of divine omniscience. The stringent Calvinist approach removes this mystery, however, by affirming that humans do not have libertarian freedom. God decrees and predestines everything, and thus it would seem that there is no mystery in dealing with human freewill. But because they cannot account for why a loving God would decree such extensive and gratuitous evil, Calvinists such as Tiessen must

say that God’s character and purposes are mysterious and unknowable. But while we cannot know God’s purposes exhaustively, it is precisely the character and purposes of God that are revealed most clearly in Scripture, especially in the life of Jesus Christ. Why be an agnostic about God’s character and purpose? Would we not rather place the mystery within the transcendent, infinite, and inexhaustible omniscience of God than in the revealed character and purposes of God?

While this review has raised numerous concerns about Tiessen’s analysis, this should not detract from the immense value of this elegant volume. Rather, raising these issues underscore the significance and value of Tiessen’s work. *Providence and Prayer* raises important issues, offers a variety of perspectives, and proposes interesting answers. It is a thought-provoking and interesting book that will be a standard reference for a long time to come. I highly recommend it for educated laypersons and college or seminary students.

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Reformed Confessions Harmonized, With an Annotated Bibliography of Reformed Doctrinal Works. Edited by Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999, xiii + 288 pp., \$19.99, paper.

This book lays out a harmony of the seven confessions of faith “most diligently adhered to by various

Reformed denominations today” (p. vii). The seven are: the Belgic Confession of Faith (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Canons of Dort (1618-19), the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646-47), and the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms (1647).

The volume follows a topical format, organized around the various *loci* of theology: theology proper, anthropology, Christology, etc. It simply lines up the various confessions across the span of both pages in this workbook-sized volume so that the reader can see at a glance exactly what each of the confessions has to say about the topics followed in sequential ordering. The layout makes for a quick and easy reference to these important documents from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. *Reformed Confessions* also features a short historical introduction to the confessions which helps the reader position these works in relation to the state churches which adopted them and in reference to one another.

This volume is a very fine and helpful introduction to the confessional tradition of the Reformed churches which grew out of the Swiss, Dutch, and English Reformation heritage. Anyone interested in historical theology ought to get a copy.

Chad Owen Brand

Southern Presbyterian Leaders, 1683-1911. By Henry Alexander White. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000, 476 pp., \$26.99.

Banner of Truth continues its excellent service of reprinting fine works of evangelical theology from the past with this wonderful survey of Southern Presbyterian individuals up to the beginning of the twentieth century. Here one finds a constellation of fascinating accounts of American Christianity, from the early migration of Scottish-Ulster Presbyterians fleeing oppression in Ireland in the early eighteenth century, through Thornwell and Dabney, and even a chapter on the redoubtable Stonewall Jackson. Kentucky Presbyterianism receives attention several times in the book, especially the founding of Transylvania University and Center College, as well as the work of James McGready and the formation of the Cumberland Presbyterian church, an “independent body of Presbyterians who held, for the most part, Arminian doctrines” (p. 211).

The book has a few problems. The print is a little hard to handle for the feeble of eye. The index is woefully incomplete. Publishers are almost better off not to offer an index if they are only going to publish partial listings of names and places. The binding is very stiff in a cloth book—Banner of Truth used to have excellent bindings, but they are declining in quality these days. I also have a couple of complaints about content, but it is futile to gripe at an author who finished his volume ninety years ago, so I will confine my complaints to the recent publisher.

I always encourage students to learn their Baptist heritage well, but once they have done that, they ought to take a glance at the other traditions

which have made such a strong stand for orthodoxy. Though many Presbyterians today cannot seem to decide what they are going to believe, most of these brethren of Scottish ancestry before 1911 did know where they stood. This delightful book will help us appreciate their contributions even more. All in all, it is a good read.

Chad Owen Brand