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Temptation: A Biblical and Psychological Approach

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Unfortunately, there are many who continue to reject our faith community because the church has not properly communicated the gospel to them. We, the church, need to accept our lumps for these miscommunications in the past. But, more importantly, we need to recognize what we are up against and learn how to proclaim the gospel anew to a hurt, harassed and helpless generation. The popularity of *The Celestine Prophecy* is another wake up call for the church to reach out and engage those fragmented lives in our midst. They are looking for connections to God and the larger human story. We have a real story to tell.

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Temptation: A Biblical and Psychological Approach

Wayne E. Oates

Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991

109 pp. \$9.95

Like a great Fire House Chili, this book is best appreciated only after one has stewed over it for a while. Although the reading is not difficult, it takes time to contemplate and assimilate the concepts Oates sets before us for consideration.

In writing this book Oates basically had three objectives. The first was "to demonstrate the function of temptation in the formation of character". The second was "to develop a holistic perception of the biblical and psychological perspectives of temptation" and the third was "to present an appreciation of the spirituality that is quietly present in the work of psychotherapists in their perspectives of temptation".

Having worked in the field of psychotherapy before entering the ordained ministry, I have a keen appreciation for the lack of communication and understanding between psychotherapists and members of the clergy. One of the gifts Oates' book presents us with is a conceptual foundation for building a bridge of understanding between these disciplines. By providing an insightful description of temptation from both theological and psychological perspectives, Oates gives us a common ground upon which we can share our concerns and insights in terms we can both understand and appreciate. This, without a doubt, will be of great help to those who, in the course of their ministry, find themselves dealing with people in the secular helping professions.

As helpful as this might be though, I find Oates' theological interpretation of temptation even more helpful for my day to day work as a parish pastor. In the grand tradition of Karl Menninger, Oates introduces his

work with these questions. "Whatever became of temptation? When was the last time you heard a sermon, read an article or book, or had a serious conversation with a friend about temptation?"

The rhetoric of these questions highlights a curious phenomenon within our society. The consciousness of sin and its predecessor temptation has in large part been replaced by legal and medical interpretations of human behaviour. While this, no doubt, is of great comfort to those of a secular bent, it raises some serious questions for those of us who are concerned with the effect of sin upon our relationship with God.

Sin by its very nature is that which alienates us from God. Therefore, at the heart of every temptation is the enticement to live a self-centered rather than God-centered life. Oates points out that such temptations usually take one of five forms, "the living enticement of our own undisciplined desires, the wide array of excuses we generate to justify our own behaviour, the spiritual testings that are common to all of us, the temptation to aim low in settling for less than our better judgment suggests for our life, and the selective inattention of not watching where we are going and what we are doing." In addressing each of these forms of temptation he notes that deception, theologically and psychologically, particularly self deception is the parent evil.

Having said that though, I hasten to add that Oates' view of temptation is refreshing in that he values the role temptation plays in spiritual formation. He does not view temptation as a sin in and of itself but rather sees it as the "crucible of human character formation".

This perspective allows us to deal openly with temptation, knowing that it is common to all people and seeing it as an internal forum which allows us to live out our lives consciously in the presence of God.

The development of this perspective and Oates' practical application of it make this a book worth reading. Like that good chili, one's appreciation of it grows over time.

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