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# To act according to the Gospel

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## **To Act According to the Gospel**

Xavier Léon-Dufour

Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005

157 pages. \$19.70 Softcover

In this book the famous French New Testament scholar makes an attempt to describe what human action looks like that is enabled and empowered by the gospel. His work with the New Testament texts is careful and judicious. The scope of his project is at the same time sweeping yet nonetheless focussed. Readers will benefit from watching a skilled Biblical interpreter at work who nonetheless seeks to bring the texts, in all their disparateness, to bear on an issue of great importance.

Naturally, the Biblical work reveals a scholar of a certain generation. Although the book, as a work of Biblical theology, ranges over several texts, its primary place of engagement is the four gospels. Léon-Dufour typically treats first the sayings and other materials that come from the synoptics. Then, toward the end of each chapter, he turns to the Gospel of John. Léon-Dufour shows himself adept in his work – although he tends to work with the texts/pericopes as small units that just happen to appear in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. When he turns to John, he is fully aware of how John has his own unique way of talking about Jesus, the gospel associated with him, and what action might mean from within a Johannine perspective. As one reads these sections, however, the reader comes away with the impression that John’s uniqueness is more one of perspective. Although John’s Gospel does not say the same thing about gospel-informed action that the synoptics do, it says something similar enough that its message is more complementary to that of the other three gospels.

The chapters of the book consider the topic from a specific series of vantage points. Chapter 1 one begins by focusing on the gospel Jesus proclaimed: in the Kingdom of God, God is present/has come to reign/is here. In chapter 2, Léon-Dufour then considers this message from Jesus in light of his relationship to the Judaism of the time. In chapter 3 broader issues of anthropology are in view: humanity’s relationship to the God-who-is-coming. In chapter 4, Léon-Dufour looks at how this understanding of humanity in relation to God then speaks to “engaging the realities of this world,” including matters of money, sex, and society. With the final chapter, Léon-Dufour then looks at love as the heart of human action. The God who comes forgiving and loving enables a

certain possibility of forgiving and loving in humanity. The book closes with an epilogue that sums up nicely the carefully wrought findings of Léon-Dufour's critical investigations.

I found the work and the topic refreshing. From the standpoint both of contemporary Christian proclamation and engagement in the world, this kind of study is of great importance. While I am less fond of viewing the problem as a kind of sweeping Biblical theological one (especially since such orientations tend to level distinctions between various texts and traditions), it is worthy of careful theological consideration – and any good theology of the gospel (or here, a kind of “theological ethic of the gospel”) should make account of the Biblical materials. Theologically, I found the repeated appeals to a synergy between God and humanity a little distracting. In actuality, the very theocentric orientation of Léon-Dufour's view of the gospel made the synergistic tag somewhat less than apt. In the end, he himself makes it all hinge on a God who comes, forgives, and loves. What he describes may be less synergistic than he thinks (especially judging by the number of the favorable quotes from Augustine toward the end of the book). Even with these disagreements, however, I recommend the book for wider reading. For anyone who has to think about the relationship of Biblical texts to a theology of the gospel and the way that gospel enables action – and what preacher doesn't! – this book is a very helpful conversation partner.

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### **Six Lives: A Memoir**

Dow Marmur

Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2004

212 pages, \$26.95 Softcover

Dow Marmur was most recently known as senior rabbi of one of the world's largest Reform synagogues, Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto, which he served from 1983 to 2000. That institution, with its six to seven thousand members, is perhaps the most influential Reform synagogue in Canada.