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Stewards, prophets, keepers of the word: leadership in the early church

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“Bultmannians” and Luther was a marriage made in heaven. Thompson explodes all that. Willy-nilly she returns to the collective and social impact of New Testament “grace” by moving Luther beyond the narrow framework of the inwardly spiritual and outwardly status quo. She demands of Luther the kind of Biblical incarnation of radical grace that screams “in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.”

I am convinced with all my heart that this book emerges as so important that it should not be consigned to a “feminist” optional text in systematic theology, as a recommended read after the required reading of the fine work *The Cross in Context*, by Douglas John Hall, or similar works by authors like Gerhard Forde. It is time to relegate them to optional readings and make Deanna Thompson’s *Crossing the Divide* the seminal text in Lutheran courses on systematic theology. This book shines like a beacon and finally helps us articulate a “justification by grace alone through faith alone” theology that has flesh and blood.

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Stewards, Prophets, Keepers of the Word: Leadership in the Early Church

Ritva H. Williams

Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006
xii + 228 pages, \$30.00 Softcover

My over-all assessment heralds this first effort as a most significant contribution to New Testament scholarship. And yet there are some weaknesses in this work, which I attribute to the challenge and difficulty of turning a doctoral thesis into a book. At times the content was repetitive, and the prose not sufficiently crisp. Sometimes it seemed as if Williams was just listing themes, point by point, without a compelling sense of integration. At times this gives her work a static character, when the reality of these early communities was more dynamic than the structure of the book might imply. At the same time,

I need to admit that these critiques border on the “picky” and should not discourage anyone from utilizing this fine work of scholarship.

However, this last critique I offer is a bit more serious. Her sections dealing with “altered states of consciousness” (ASCs) beg both for a deeper analysis and perhaps more attention being given to the value of the phenomenon in the first century. To be sure, Williams deals with these, but I think here she could strengthen her case by delving a little deeper. Once again, my critique may go beyond her intention – namely, a broad sweep as opposed to a focussed study. So, in sum, my critiques need to be taken within the context of the author’s purpose and intention, and their strengths and weaknesses must be based on the author’s entire project.

Most important, however, are the overwhelming positive qualities of the book. Dr. Williams’ scholarship stands out as both thorough and impeccable. Two threads dominate the book in creative and intertwining ways. On the one hand she examines three major offices or vocations within the early Jesus movements from Jesus himself up to and including the first part of the second century C.E. She accomplishes serious and consistent text analysis of written materials both canonical and non-canonical. On the other hand, she demonstrates the variety and evolution of these “offices” throughout the first century of the movement(s). Hence she shows effectively how ideas and positions of leadership shift and change according to need and the passage of time. This book makes an important contribution in the on-going study of early Christianity. I do not doubt for a minute that this book will launch a significant publishing career and that we will hear more of the fine trail-blazing work of Ritva Williams.

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