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New Wine Into Fresh Wineskins: Contextualizing the Early Christian Confessions

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New Wine Into Fresh Wineskins: Contextualizing the Early Christian Confessions

Richard N. Longenecker

Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999

207 pages, \$24.99 Softcover

Written from the perspective of a New Testament scholar, this book represents a unique approach to the interaction of Christianity and culture. Longenecker has two purposes. First, he delineates how the early Christian confessions are contextualized in the New Testament. Second, he uses these observations to support a method of contextualizing these confessions in today's complex world, both within the church and in the mission field. His method strives to remain true both to the core beliefs of Christianity and to the unique culture, subculture or worldview of the people who become followers of Christ. Akin to Jesus' parabolic statement that new wine must be poured into fresh wineskins so that both may be preserved, Longenecker contends that God desires the core of the gospel message to be intermingled with cultural identity. This process leads to authentic Christian living and theology.

The "confessions" of the earliest Christians were expressions or statements of Christian beliefs first used in community worship settings. Longenecker postulates that the foundations of the Christian faith reside in these confessions. They were expressed or "contextualized" within the cultural (linguistic, symbolic, etc.) milieu of the early Christian writers and woven into the fabric of the various texts in the New Testament in the form of statements, hymns and other formulaic passages. Longenecker effectively and succinctly summarizes nine key elements of the confessions that he regards as central to the early Christian expression of faith (Part 1). Analyzing many of the New Testament documents in Part 2, he explains the literary and historical context of these key elements wherever they are found.

Longenecker's expertise in biblical scholarship provides a knowledgeable exposition on the contextualization of confessions within the New Testament. The content is solid. However, the presentation is, at times, tedious and it is easy to lose sight of the large picture in the midst of his detailed analysis. Perhaps, if he had visually flagged the key elements more effectively his analysis would have been more engaging.

The intended audience appears to be those involved in church and missions ministry, but Longenecker's assumptions about his audience's prior knowledge are not always consistent. In the New Testament section, he is sometimes careful to give background to scholastic issues, but other times he assumes too much regarding knowledge of Greek syntax and a fairly sophisticated awareness of New Testament scholarship.

On the other hand, in Part 3, Longenecker offers an accessible, informative summary of various philosophical approaches to modern evangelism, including the "synergistic-developmental model." He highlights this model as a dynamic process that uses creativity and analogy to combine the core Christian gospel (expressed in the New Testament confessions) with the cultural norms of people who chose to follow Christ. In this model, worship, preaching, theological understanding and ethics are all based on the core gospel, but also subject to change and development depending on cultural and temporal context. Perhaps, if Part 3 had preceded Part 2, a clearer sense of direction and focus in the New Testament analysis would have emerged.

Though the content is not always engaging, Longenecker's approach does provide stimulus for considering the interaction between Christianity and culture in the complex, multicultural world in which we currently live.

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Ambrose of Milan's Method of Mystagogical Preaching

Craig A. Satterlee

Collegetown, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2002

365 pages, \$38.95 Softcover

Satterlee has allowed readers of his dissertation from Notre Dame to catch a glimpse of one of the company of heaven – St. Ambrose of Milan. Satterlee's desire in studying Ambrose is twofold: 1) to understand what it meant for Ambrose to preach mystagogically and 2) to ascertain a method of mystagogical preaching for our own era. Before beginning this task, Satterlee lays the groundwork for a proper understanding of mystagogy defined as, ". . . sustained reflection on the Church's rites of initiation, preaching on the 'mysteries' of the Christian faith," and