

The Sacraments in Biblical Perspective

By Ronald P. Byars.

Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. xiv + 350 pp. \$40.00.

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Read the back flap on the dust jacket of his book, and you will find that Ron Byars is a liturgical scholar, biblical theologian, and seasoned parish pastor. Read the book itself, and you will discover a man deeply in love with the sacraments of the church in all their scriptural depth and ritual richness. As one who hails from a denomination where references to baptism are front and center every Sunday and where the “real presence” in the Meal is a given, I thought I already adequately appreciated Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. But to my surprise, this book drew me deeper into my own love affair with the sacraments and the rituals, images, and symbols (that Byars reminds us are never “just” symbols) that surround them.

In the book’s introduction, the author makes a persuasive case that now is a “Sacramental Moment” for the church, a period in history when many of the smug assumptions of the Enlightenment are being called into question by the continually emerging paradigms of post-modernism. He argues winningly that this paradigmatic emergence is offering the church a winsome invitation to embrace the heart and move the sacraments away from the liturgical margins to stand at the center of corporate worship alongside the Word read, preached, and sung. Clearly, the author is addressing those segments of the Reformed tradition that have not yet fully embraced the sacramental intentions of conservative reformers such as Martin Luther. That said, this introduction is a stirring and instructive exposition even for “sacramental” churches for whom the sacraments are not on the margins.

The bulk of the book provides a comprehensive look at virtually every ceremonial and existential aspect of Holy Baptism and Communion. It would be difficult to find a facet of these two sacraments that Byars does not address, including such neuralgic issues as infant versus believer’s baptism, Eucharistic hospitality (that is, “Who is invited to the table?”) and the perceived conflict between the Meal as “real presence” and the Meal as memorial feast. Using a vast array of texts from the Christian scriptures but also from the Hebrew

Bible (Who would think, for example, to look in the book of Numbers or Leviticus for texts that draw out the meaning and implication of baptism?) the author meticulously lifts up the components of each sacrament to expose what the sacraments tell us about the God we know in Jesus Christ and the life to which we are called as those graciously resourced by the Bath and the Meal.

In summary, this book has enough “heft” to make it a worthy text for any seminary classroom and enough accessibility for use as a pastoral resource for a congregational Bible study around the sacraments. It would be particularly helpful for those congregations interested in sacramental renewal in the church.

A Woman's Place; House Churches in Earliest Christianity

By Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald, with Janet Tulloch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006). 346 + vi pp. \$20.00.

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MacDonald and Osiek have written a helpful and engaging book that is full of insight into the lives of women in the earliest church and in the setting of the first century. They discuss the lives of women as wives, mothers, patrons, and slaves. MacDonald and Osiek are careful about the dating of their sources so that the picture they present is that of the Roman-influenced culture of the first century, as distinguished from earlier classical Greece and from the later church. They highlight basic aspects of life for women and how those activities would have shaped the meetings of the early church.

In their discussion of wives in the first century they show that there were changes in the ways authority over women functioned and in the ways women exercised authority. At the same time, they note the tensions inherent in calling for wives to submit while also commending them for being leaders in the church.

One of the outstanding features of this book is that it locates the church firmly in real households and draws out implications of that setting for the nature of the Christian assembly. Noticing that this setting would entail the presence of nursing mothers and small children shifts our perception of church meetings. The household setting is also the place women would be seen as educators, especially of children. So some teaching roles for women would have seemed natural in that setting. Locating the church in the household, they argue, puts it squarely within the sphere of women's leadership and authority. Wives and widows were seen as the masters of the household in the first century. While women were often not allowed to hold public office (though this varied from place to place), well-to-do women exercised considerable power economically and socially. In the atmosphere of the first century, women leaders emerged as "agents of expansion" (220ff.) for the church.

This description of the place of women in the first century runs counter to many prevailing views of their plight. Osiek and MacDonald do not discount the oppression many women endured. In particular their discussion of female slaves makes it clear that these

women were the economic and sexual property of their masters. As Osiek and MacDonald express it, slaves have a sex but not a gender (96). Slaves could claim no chastity because they were allowed no honor or status. Such a situation exposes another tension in the lives of those in the church. How could such women obey the church's strict codes about sex while being, by definition, sexually available to their masters? Later Christian writers address such questions, but not the biblical texts.

MacDonald and Osiek set some texts in such a different place that readers may begin to understand them differently. They find the household codes oppressive, but consider the possibility that some of them also contained liberative possibilities. They assert that conceiving of the church as a female body (the bride of Christ) may have contained a critique of accepted household arrangements. They also note the limited choices open to women, especially those married to non-believers.

The book also contains a chapter on women as leaders in Roman funerary practices by Janet Tulloch. It opens yet another window into the leadership roles women possessed in the first century and how those may have been reflected in the church.

While this book is specifically about women in the early church, its solid research, careful judgments, and good writing make it a book that opens the reader to a new understanding not only of women, but of the whole church. I highly recommend this book as an aid to understanding the setting of the early church and the biblical texts that were written to and for that church.

The Living Voice of the Gospels.

By Francis J. Moloney. Second edition. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2007. 344 pp. \$19.95.

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The Living Voice of the Gospels was initially published in 1986 and the second edition is a comprehensive revision. The aim of this volume is to distill and disseminate the fruit of scholarly research on the canonical Gospels to those in the church who read the Bible as Scripture. With this general audience in mind, Moloney strives to present his exegetical work in a way that is process-transparent and accessible to those without any formal training in biblical studies.

The first chapter is an overview of how to read a Gospel well. From the outset, Moloney urges his readers to move beyond the Enlightenment's juxtaposition of truth and fact to read the Gospels as deliberately constructed theological narratives that bear testimony to the significance of Jesus' life. Chapter one also includes a very basic introduction to Gospel source theory and concludes with a discussion of how oral and written traditions were eventually codified into what we call "Gospels," which Moloney understands to be a unique genre created by the writer of Mark and adopted by the other Gospel writers (34).

The body of the book consists of four sections—one for each Gospel. Each of these sections consists of two chapters. The first outlines the structure of the appropriate Gospel and attunes the reader to the ways that the Gospel writers use literary devices to develop their theological narratives. These chapters provide a broad overview of the content, major themes, and theological message of each Gospel. The second chapter of each section analyses a discrete section of the Gospel that represents a particular literary form (Mark's prologue, Matthew's infancy narrative, Luke's passion narrative, and John's Bread of Life discourse). In these chapters, Moloney periodically raises historical, intertextual, and linguistic issues, though his interpretation consistently leans most heavily on narrative analysis.

A concluding chapter offers a cursory introduction to source, form, redaction, and narrative criticism and recounts the rise of each method in modern biblical scholarship. Here, Moloney also includes a brief overview of historical Jesus studies where he emphasizes the

importance of the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, for Christian faith.

Considering the length of the book in relation to the girth of material it covers, Moloney achieves a surprising depth of theological reflection. What is most appreciable about this volume is that it invites readers to critically engage the Gospels in ways that constructive and edifying to the church. There are two points of critique that would be of particular interest to the readership of *LTQ*. First, it would be easy for some readers to get the impression that narrative analysis is the only exegetical tool one needs to read the Gospels well. Perhaps Moloney could have done more to explain how narrative analysis fits into the larger enterprise of biblical interpretation. Second, each section concludes with a bibliography of resources that Moloney believes are accessible to the non-specialist. However, in the opinion of the reviewer, some of the resources listed would not be assessable to a general audience. For example, the commentaries on Mark by R. A. Guelich, C. E. Evans, and W. L. Lane and those on Luke by I. H. Marshall and A. Plummer are all part of series that assume some knowledge of Greek and a grasp of the basic tenets of critical biblical studies. These criticisms should not detract from the overall quality of *The Living Voice of the Gospels*. The reviewer highly recommends it as an introduction to the Gospels for those with little or no theological training. It is best suited for use in a church setting or perhaps as a text for undergraduate coursework on the Gospels from an explicitly Christian perspective.