

## Book Review

**Tom Nettles, *Ready for Reformation: Bringing Authentic Reform to Southern Baptist Churches* (Broadman & Holman, 2005): 140 pp..**

This is a courageous book in which Nettles, Professor of Historical Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, dares to say that the recovery of Biblical inerrancy among Southern Baptists, though laudable, does not go far enough. With a voice like a prophet, Nettles warns that true reformation involves more “than the mere recovery of biblical authority” (2). The chapters are relatively brief, but the writing is dense and often lyrical. There is much for the thoughtful reader to digest.

In chapter one (Remember from Where You Have Fallen), Nettles opens with a cautionary warning that Southern Baptists not repeat the error of Jehu in 2 Kings and settle for a half-baked reformation. The battle for the Bible in the SBC is over and conservatives have won. Southern Baptists must now ask what that inerrant Bible says about the purity of our doctrine and practice: “If only the acceptance of the divine *authority* of the deposit gains adherence but the *content* of the treasure itself lies dormant, the recovery is a sham” ( 9-10). Southern Baptist must not enjoy “premature satisfaction” (9) at the recovery of inerrancy, lest the conservative resurgence become a failed reformation.

After presenting his initial thesis in chapter one, Nettles turns to examine the impact of taking the Bible seriously in various areas of faith and practice. Chapter two (The Health of Confessional Christianity) defends the Baptist practice of confessional boundaries. Chapter three (Priority and Power of Truth in Proclamation) is a serious call for evaluation of our preaching. Every preacher would benefit from reading this chapter. This reviewer was so struck and convicted while reading Nettle’s words that he felt compelled to re-read the chapter aloud to his wife. Nettles points to weak preaching as a primary cause of weak Christians and weak churches. Our preaching today is too filled with illustration and sentimentality rather than doctrinal exposition which believers so desperately need in order to grow strong in the faith and resist the world’s allures:

The believer’s only opportunity to hear an argument mounted against the torrent of temporality pressed daily and hourly into his conscience comes when a Christian minister stands to preach the Word of God. Will he hear anything that challenges and strips bare the lies that have pressed on him from every quarter? Or will he hear a few assertions from a biblical text surrounded by warm stories garnished with the trappings of sentimentality and never enter substantially into the truth? (32).

Chapters four and five (Baptists Must Recover the Work of Evangelism, Parts 1-2) challenge superficial and pragmatic evangelism methods. Chapter six (Baptist Must Recapture the Complementarity of Law and Gospel) urges Southern Baptist to take seriously the relationship between the law and the gospel. Though moderates obviously fail to grasp this great truth in their advocacy of “freedom,” liberty of conscience,” and

“free inquiry,” conservative churches make a similar error when they assume the minister’s task is “to present Biblical principles as giving a sound foundation for day-to-day happiness and healthy relationships” (72-73). Nettles ends this chapter with a keen insight: “Misperceptions and misapplications of this issue within the pale of the conservative movement of Southern Baptists could eventually be more crippling to the recovery of biblical Christianity than the active opposition of the moderate movement” (75). Indeed, the greatest challenge facing Southern Baptist is no longer the ever-waning moderate movement, but the siren song of therapeutic pragmatism.

In chapter seven (Recovery of a Grace-Centered Theology), Nettles makes the case that the reformation of the SBC will not be complete until it comes to terms with the sovereignty of God in salvation. Nettles is well-known in Southern Baptist circles as a confessional Calvinist who has worked in the Founders Movement to point the denomination back to its Reformation roots. He pulls no punches in this chapter in laying the issue on the line:

Reformation of Baptist identity will be unretrieved to the degree that a grace-centered theology remains unrecovered. If effectual calling cannot be reconciled with human freedom and responsibility without making a person a robot, by the same token inspiration cannot operate to produce an infallible text apart from a mindless kind of robotic dictation. If the work of salvation hangs on human will, then so must the work of revelation and inspiration. The vital organ of inerrancy cannot survive in the absence of the nutrition of grace” (89).

In chapter eight (Trinitarian Christ-Centered Theology), Nettles calls for robust Christ-centered preaching in Southern Baptist pulpits. In chapter nine (Theologically Integrated Ecclesiology) the connection is made between right doctrine and right church order. If Baptist truly begin to take the Bible seriously then they will recover a proper understanding of church membership, the eldership, and church discipline.

In the final chapter (Theology that Will Support a Worldview) Nettles challenges “the worldliness of our thoughts” (116). He contends: “A structural denominational change from moderates to inerrantists does not constitute a reformation without a corresponding revitalization of applied doctrine” (116). Baptists must seek out a holiness of life and a Biblical worldview.

The epilogue recaps the vital arguments. Again, “Southern Baptists have taken the first step” toward reformation in their embrace of inerrancy, but “[s]tewardship of this recovery calls for long-term evaluation and renewal” (127). If we are not careful “the good beginning can come to a stumbling halt” (129). Nettles calls his fellow Southern Baptists to “self-judgement” (130). The greatest threat to the modern renewal of the SBC does not come from moderates without but from conservatives within: “While vigilance must endure in every area that was threatened by the insidious impact of the moderate contingency, many difficulties confront the church that have little or nothing to do with that influence” (130). Again, Nettles is less concerned with theological moderates than with his fellow inerrantists who are driven by pragmatic (numerical) success:

Though lip service is given to biblical authority, that which seems most dominant is the simple observation of success in terms of the immediate gratification of visible increase.

This practical pragmatism leads to theological minimalism (130).

Once again, Nettles' words have the ring of the prophetic. Some are perpetually celebrating the victory of inerrancy among Southern Baptists. Nettles rightly points out that such celebrations are premature, for the recovery of Biblical authority was only the first stage. The next will be the application of the teaching of the inerrant Bible in the pulpits and church conferences of the local churches. Nettles is also bold in his identification not of moderates but of pragmatism as the chief danger to the reformation's success. This book deserves to be read, pondered, and thoroughly discussed by Southern Baptists in leadership in our churches.

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