

A Book Worth Discussing

# The Bible and Reconciliation

James Prothro's *The Bible and Reconciliation:  
Confession, Repentance, and Restoration,  
A Catholic Biblical Theology of the Sacraments*

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The last few decades have witnessed a flourishing in the practice of biblical theology from theological perspectives that value and emphasize the truth and infallibility of Scripture. Series such as *New Studies in Biblical Theology* by InterVarsity or *Short Studies in Biblical Theology* by Crossway exemplify this trend. Biblical theology traces the unfolding of theological themes across the canon of Scripture. Biblical theology also allows the engagement of each idea in its own right and space, noting both the differences and continuity across time, as each theme develops and grows across the canon. An essential connection exists between the rigorous historical exegetical study of individual passages and the broader conclusions of systematic theology for the believer today. The strength of biblical theology derives from examinations of critical concepts in the Bible that are often absent or lacking from many systematic theologies, such as hospitality, the royal priesthood, covenant, and kingdom. Christians from Reformed and free-church traditions have excelled in writing many of these introductory books on biblical theology that are both accessible to a curious general audience and uphold a traditional view of Scripture's integrity. As a result, many preliminary books of biblical theology privilege themes that all Christians share or discuss topics meaningful to free-church Christian traditions. Sacramental Christian Churches often find that some themes important to their own traditions are not collected together in books easily engaged by a general audience. Until the last few decades, there were few accessible books of biblical theology, as opposed to dogmatic theology, written by Roman Catholics or Eastern Orthodox presenting accessible themes important to their own traditions. Within this field, Baker Academic has introduced a new series, *A Catholic Biblical Theology of the Sacraments*, to bring attention to some of these sacramental themes, such as marriage, baptism, priesthood, and the anointing of the sick. In addition to the excellent cradle of Roman Catholic writers, some readers will find it interesting that many of the writers in this series are either Evangelical/Protestant converts to Roman Catholicism or have been educated at evangelical institutions.

In this vein, James Prothro provides an invaluable survey of sin, repentance, and restoration throughout Scripture in his book *The Bible and Reconciliation: Confession, Repentance, and Restoration*. Prothro writes as a practicing Roman Catholic worshiper, weaving in modern applications and theological statements from time to time in his exegetical survey; the book is written by a Roman Catholic for other Roman Catholics. Nevertheless, other traditional Christians, notably Lutherans, will find much valuable material and insights in his work. While writing as a Roman Catholic, Prothro, as a former Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod pastor, expresses many themes familiar to readers shaped within the Lutheran tradition. While expounding biblical patterns, the book contains a constant emphasis on God’s grace and mercy, law and gospel, salvation, repentance, and restoration. Christians accustomed to the regular disciplines of confession, repentance, the declaration of our grace and forgiveness in Christ, and the calling to a pursuit of holy living will find much value in this text.

In this book discussion I will note the biblical citations from which Prothro builds his arguments. When I provide my own theological commentary after a section, citations are my own observations. At the beginning of his text, he notes that he writes utilizing the form of biblical theology expressed by authors such as Gerhardus Vos, Brevard Childs, and Pope Benedict XVI as he draws together various testimonies while also drawing together synthetically the truth expressed by many witnesses in light of the revelation of Jesus. As a work of biblical theology, the book rearticulates the images and metaphors provided by each testimony in Scripture while resisting a flattening of these images into one system (Prothro, 20-21).

Using the biblical narrative and terminology, Prothro provides a helpful summary of the consequences of sin and God’s restorative acts of grace and mercy: “God’s children sin in various ways, failing to live out their identity under the Father, and some choose to leave the household altogether. But God wants his children home, and he embraces them with mercy and grace when they turn back in repentance” (Prothro, 2). Prothro weaves together the trends of human straying and God’s mercy across major biblical stories and groups, highlighting insights that are true in the lives of Christians today. In the stories of Adam and Cain, God regularly meets the people after they sin, providing them a chance for repentance. God’s mercy stands behind His question, “where are you” (Gen 3:9), inviting the people to turn back to God in repentance and have their respective relationships healed (Prothro, 26). The stories of the Flood and Babel highlight the terrible consequences of impiety toward God on a global scale (Prothro, 32-35). Likewise, the stories of Abraham and later the children of Israel in the Exodus and Wilderness repeat the cycles of the enslavement of sin and God’s mercy and deliverance. Just as the people of Israel sin immediately in the wilderness after their deliverance through the waters of the Red Sea, this typologically parallels the life of Christians who sin after baptism and are again in need of God’s forgiveness (1 Cor 10:1-2) (Prothro, 46-48). While God forgives the people when they refuse to trust God and enter the Promised Land after the negative report of the spies, there nevertheless remains the conse-

quences of wandering in the wilderness through which God desires to shape the people (Num 14:20-23, 31-34) (Prothro, 52-53). The book progresses to provide surveys of grace, repentance, and reconciliation across the narrative books, wisdom books, and the prophets. Prothro's presentational strength is allowing readers to take time to examine how the people of God received forgiveness across various episodes of the Old Testament. This is particularly helpful when he notes how sin and forgiveness are explained across grand narratives and stories instead of merely thinking in individual terms, as we often do in church today (i.e. what did I do wrong this week?).

Within the narrative development, the book notes that the Babylonian Exile was a form of restorative discipline when God would purify the people through this experience prior to the coming day when their full reconciliation would occur (Isa 4:4; 48:10; Bar 2:30). Although back in the land, the people are still in spiritual exile, waiting for God to fully reconcile with His people (Jer 50:20; 2 Macc 8:29). There remains the hope of a reversal of the consequences of sin and death through a future physical resurrection of all the people (Dan 12:2; Wis 3:2-7; Isa 25:8). That will be a time of a New Covenant, which will provide the forgiveness of sin and the transformation of the hearts of the people (Jer 31:33-34; Ezek 36:25-57) (Prothro, 94-113). This rescue mission culminates in the Messiah Jesus who releases those captive to sin and death (John 11:14-15; 38-44; Mk 3:27; Luke 4:18). Jesus's ministry reveals an extravagant mercy toward sinners as He continually seeks out those who are lost (Matt 9:11; Luke 15:12; 19:1-10). True repentance in Jesus's ministry gets characterized by doing what Jesus calls His redeemed followers to do, bearing fruit worthy of repentance (Matt 3:8; 21:28-32) (Prothro, 114-145). For many people in the pews, a difficulty lies in knowing how the Gospels relate to the prophets or the rest of the Old Testament. Once they understand that the Old Testament stories lead to the reality of exile, they can understand the hope associated with a new Exodus and a New Covenant that will result in the restoration of the people's relationship with God. This better primes them to see how Jesus, the enactor of a New Covenant, fulfills those aspirations.

He then turns to the nuts and bolts of how believers receive this New Covenant forgiveness. This is an area where Lutherans will have much agreement despite some differences around the means of this forgiveness. When highlighting baptism as a physical means by which believers are united in Christ and thus receive forgiveness, he devotes a chapter to the role of the church's ministry in mediating post-baptismal forgiveness, which are called the keys (Matt 16:19; John 13:20; John 20:22-23). Arguing for the apostolic succession and Episcopal structure of church leadership, Jesus shares his authority with Peter, which is given to the apostles, and then Presbyters, who they ordain (Prothro, 146-165); their ministry of preaching and sacraments links to confessions, which can be provided to a Presbyter/priest (Prothro, 198-204). Given that Prothro is writing primarily for Roman Catholics, he infers that Presbyters possess a unique priestly mediating ministry for providing forgiveness.

Some readers, such as myself, may find that his development of the Levitical sacerdotal feature of elders/Presbyters goes beyond what is developed in the text while simultaneously certainly recognizing that this was claimed by some third century church fathers (i.e. Cyprian, *Ep.* 63). Like most Second Temple Jewish Synagogues, the early churches or assemblies were normally structurally led by male Presbyters/elders/bishops (Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; Tit 1:5-7; 1 *Clem* 44.1-5), yet this did not preclude the ministry to which Jesus called all men and women to be His disciples who proclaim His word and spread the kingdom of God (Luke 8:1-3; 10:1-12; Acts 9:36) while hearing the confessions of sin to one another (1 John 1:8-10; Jas 5:16). While certainly elders/bishops normally led churches, it is not clear that they were all ordained uniquely by the successors of Peter or that they alone could hear confessions. In certain circumstances, the congregation or fellow elders could appoint men as elders (*Did* 15; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.1; Tertullian, *Exh. cast.*, 7). The question of who ordains who is an area where Lutheran ecclesiology is eclectic, and even today, there exists differences between the Evangelical Church of Sweden, which maintains Episcopal structure, and the Association of Free Lutheran Churches, which understands ordination to come primarily from the congregation; however, in both traditions, the elder/Presbyter/pastor, while entrusted with the sacrament of confession, is not the only one who can provide confession and absolution. In my perception, eclectic Lutheran ecclesiology reflects some of the diversity that existed in church structures in the early church.

The book highlights that the goal of confession is always the restoration of the believer by God's grace. Within this vein, Prothro surveys what happens when believers reject God's grace. He provides a helpful survey of apostasy and the restoration of those in mortal sin as believers await Christ's new creation (Heb 6:4-6; Jas 5:19-20; Jude 22-23; 1 John 5:16) (Prothro, 175-176; 204-208). Although not commonly referenced, Lutherans likewise recognize mortal sins that accompany the loss of faith (Andrew Voigt, *Biblical Dogmatics* 65). For the early 20th century Lutheran professor Andrew Voigt, certain sins accompany the reality that the believer no longer believes in God; however, what separates the believer from God is the lack of faith. It would have been interesting to explore more at this point the status of those who die with unrepentant sins, given its common occurrence in the parish. Especially if you work in parish ministry, this remains a very pressing issue. The empty pews in many Lutheran and Catholic Churches at worship, as well as the nonchalant willful engagement in sin that often accompanies a lack of faith, ought to weigh heavily on the hearts of many pastors when they think of people's souls in light of eternity. I think of the words of the early 20th century Norwegian Lutheran pastor and professor J.N. Kildahl: "Many people, however, fall away from their baptismal covenant. And there are many, many such in our churches – people who have never experienced a revival, who have never been really troubled about their spiritual condition, who have never been anxious about their relation to God, and who have never experienced the power of the new life and the peace which faith brings to the soul" (*Christian Dogmatics* 285-286).

At the end of the book Prothro gives an excellent survey of sin, repentance, and growing in Christ. In contrast with the old Adam, subject to sin and death, believers are given a new birth in Christ in hope of the resurrection and incorruptibility as children of God (1 John 3:1; 1 Pet 1:3; 1:23). In contrast to condemnation and death in the first Adam, believers have justification and new life in the New Adam (Rom 5:16-17; 1 Cor 1:30, 15:22). Humans naturally live in sin, apart from God's grace, and stand as God's enemies (Rom 5:10; Jas 4:4), yet Jesus's work of justification brings reconciliation, restoring humans to friendships and love with God (Rom 5:1, 10) (Prothro, 168). The life of faith is a struggle. Even though believers are not under the dominion of sin, they still can submit themselves to it again by their choices and return to enslavement (Rom 6:12, 16; Gal 4:8-9). God provides believers with his Spirit, which empowers them to fight against the influences of sin and the fleshly desires (Gal 5:17; Rom 6:12-13; 8:5-9; 13:11-14) (Prothro, 166-178). Paul's continual exhortation to fight against carnal passions and warnings against returning to enslavement assumes that believers are regularly tempted and do sin after becoming Christians. Like plants, believers grow into salvation and bear fruit (1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18) (Prothro, 192-193). Sin is not simply the breaking of arbitrary rules but the turning away from what God has made us for. Rather than hiding, the narrative of Scripture reminds us again and again that God continually acts to mercifully restore his people (Prothro, 213-214). Prothro continually emphasizes that the believer's status of holiness and transformation flow from being in Christ. It would be interesting to further delve into where he specifically sees the break between classical Lutheran understandings of a believer being holy and justified because he is in Christ, with the resulting sanctification and holy living that flows from that union, and where he understands himself to fit in the Roman Catholic tradition that has traditionally understood there to be a role of human merit in the maintenance of one's status of justification.

In this volume, Prothro highlights the centrality of grace and God's mercy throughout Scripture. This text is an excellent introductory and accessible tome of biblical theology for the curious student. Portions of this book could easily be adapted for use in a Sunday School or Bible study, serving as a helpful aid for Christians to piece together the overarching themes of reconciliation throughout Scripture. Of particular strength is his introduction to reconciliation across the Old Testament. While Lutherans and other evangelicals will come to different conclusions about a few topics, the vast majority of the book is a concise and valuable survey of the biblical material for all Christians.

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# Promissio

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