

Book Reviews

Church Planters: Inside the World of Religion Entrepreneurs

Richard N. Pitt

New York, NY: Oxford University Press

2021, 336 pp., hardcover, \$34.99

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Reviewed by Zachariah S. Motts

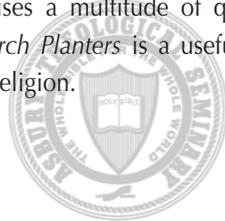
Church Planters is a good example of two disciplines being brought together in a way that sparks new light and illuminates possibilities for further research in each. It is not unusual for one discipline to appropriate an insight from another in order to provide a novel metaphor or angle, but Pitt manages to bring the religious world of church planting into contact with the business-focused sphere of entrepreneurship in a way that benefits both fields. Pitt draws on previous research on Christian pastors, an emic understanding of the perspectives of religious leaders, and an etic sociological approach that allows a serious look at the entrepreneurial functions of certain religious experiences. This background is applied to a fresh, qualitative study of pastors who start new churches: church planters.

Pitt notes that, if we take account of the organizational structures, massive budgets, promotional activities, and market competition that affect the rise and fall of megachurches, there is much that can be directly paralleled with a for-profit corporation. Yet, business textbooks do not tend to look to the religious world for examples of success, and religious leaders are often reticent to view their ministries through the mundane, secular lenses of markets and profit. Spiritual growth is not a product like a Starbucks cup of coffee, and business entrepreneurs do not often have to legitimate their activities by referring to a transcendent calling or purpose.

One can almost feel the magnetic repulsion as Pitt pushes these concepts into view and asks pastors who their competition is, what the church's market niche and product is, and how they measure success. This is not the usual vocabulary these pastors use to describe what they do, but there are interesting comparisons that emerge through the process of thinking from these angles.

As one might expect, there are ways in which church planting does not fit the mold of a small business. Measurement of success is one of the areas where founding pastors have difficulty pointing to something like profit margin, products sold, or customers served. Identifying outcomes that a founding pastor sees as motivation to continue or not can be difficult. Even after years tending a church plant with little church growth, pastors can fall back on a concept like faithfulness to their calling in a way that business owners responsible to employees, a board, or other stakeholders cannot. In fact, because many of these pastors work another job the church does not have to pay a fulltime salary, and because they tend to have a strong influence over their congregations, church planters avoid some of the pressures that a small business owner would have when the measures of success do not seem to be there.

Pitt has collected a diverse sample of pastors and conducted thorough and sympathetic interviews. I was suspicious at the beginning that Pitt may be too sympathetic and close to his subject matter on the religious side, but there is an admirable even-handedness and objectivity in Pitt's approach. That feature allows this to be an interesting and useful study, whether the reader has religious inclinations or not. I agree with Pitt's assessment at the end that the research could have been strengthened by including pastors whose church plant failed, which seems like a gap in the surveying that raises a multitude of questions. However, even with this limitation, *Church Planters* is a useful study for the student of entrepreneurship and/or religion.



The Book of Acts as Story: A Narrative-Critical Study

David R. Bauer

Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic

2021, 304 pp., Paperback, \$32.99

ISBN: 978-0801098321

Reviewed by William B. Bowes

David Bauer is Ralph Waldo Beeson Professor of Inductive Biblical Studies and dean of the School of Biblical Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary. In this exceptionally helpful volume, Bauer examines the complete text and sequence of the Acts of the Apostles according to the principles and methods of narrative criticism, offering perhaps the most comprehensive and up-to-date study of its kind. Since the late 1980s, the narrative approach to the Gospels and Acts as a subset of literary criticism has steadily grown in popularity and influence, and by examining the text through this approach Bauer intends to produce “a fresh interpretation of Acts and insights into the meaning of some of the major themes and motifs of the book” (3). The book thus functions as a narrative-critical commentary, and proceeds with a threefold lens that Bauer identifies from the beginning: First that Luke’s narrative presents God as realizing his purposes in the world through the exalted Christ who is the story’s dominant character, second that despite narrative tensions and dissonances, Acts presents a consistent message throughout, and third that a narrative approach to Acts illuminates the text in a way not possible through utilizing the more traditional historical-critical method.

The book is divided into seven chapters, with the first three serving as something of an introductory section. The first chapter explores important background elements of the book itself, such as its genre and why genre matters. The second chapter examines narrative criticism as a method for studying Acts, and how viewing Acts through this framework highlights the various ways that the different threads of the story and characters come together to paint a larger and more unified picture. In doing this, Bauer notes how the flow of Acts operates according to different plot levels and unfolds through the development of particular characters moving in a consistent literary trajectory. One of the most useful elements of the second chapter was Bauer’s emphasis on the role of Luke as a narrator, and how his point of view helps us as readers to better understand his work. The

third chapter is an in-depth exploration of the literary structure of Acts, which he divides into a threefold geographical substructure stemming from the statement about the church's mission in 1:8. The fourth through the seventh chapters are then comprised of Bauer's commentary, proceeding from this aforementioned substructure. Bauer begins with an analysis of the initial chapter (1:1-26) as a preparation for the three larger sections to follow, which he separates based on the witness to Jerusalem (2:1-8:1a), the witness to Judea and Samaria to Antioch (8:1b-12:25) and the witness to the end of the earth (13:1-28:31).

The fourth chapter examines the initial chapter of Acts according to the idea of a narrative frame which carries readers from the reader's world to the text world. To Bauer, the first chapter is the hermeneutical key for the rest of the whole book, and in each subsequent section the narrator "assumes information from this introductory material to clarify and enrich his account" (80). The fifth chapter focuses on the initial experience of the disciples in Jerusalem through the speech of Stephen and the ensuing persecution, with Bauer thoroughly noting how the narrator continuously emphasizes the unfolding divine plan throughout the initial expansion of the church. The sixth chapter begins with 8:1b, where "the narrator clearly marks a new stage of development in the story" (131) as the mission extends beyond Jerusalem for the first time. Bauer also notes how the focus on characters like Philip marks a narrative shift as well, in that ministerial responsibility and authority begins to shift away from only the original apostles. One of the great strengths of this chapter (and of the book overall) is Bauer's highlighting of the subtle narrative connections between different characters and events which tie back either to earlier events in the storyline or foreshadow later events in the storyline, based on language, themes, or intertwining plotlines. The final chapter focuses on the last, large section of Acts, dominated by Paul's evangelistic efforts. At this point, Bauer highlights once more how the narrator focuses not on the efforts of the church's leaders in the expansion of the witness, but on the character of the Holy Spirit as the primary actor and agent. Additionally, in the shift of the narrative toward Paul, readers again see "the progressive shifting of certain responsibilities that had been lodged in the Twelve to non-apostles" (185). In my view, one of the great strengths of this chapter was Bauer's excellent analysis of Paul's different speeches, with his illuminating commentary on the Areopagus speech (201-210) being a highlight of the entire book.

Overall, Bauer's work has much to commend it and will serve as a helpful addition to recent studies on Acts. In the same way that Robert Tannehill's two-volume *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts* (1986, 1989) was a seminal contribution for students of Acts when explorations in narrative criticism were only beginning, so also this volume has the potential to leave a similarly strong mark now that such approaches have become more common. Additionally, an attractive element of Bauer's work is that it maintains a manageable length while not compromising breadth, due to Bauer's focus on remaining within the bounds of his method of choice. The book would make an excellent addition to the eager reader's library.

Letters for the Church: Reading James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John and Jude as Canon

Darian R. Lockett
 Westmont, IL: IVP Academic
 2021, 248 pp., Paperback, \$30.00
 ISBN: 978-0830850891

Reviewed by William B. Bowes

Darian Lockett is professor of New Testament at Biola University, where he has served on the faculty since 2007. Lockett has distinguished himself in recent years with numerous publications on the Catholic Epistles, and this volume is a helpful contribution to what is commonly held to be an oft-neglected area of scripture. Lockett's work serves two primary purposes, the first being to illustrate how James, Jude, the Petrine letters, and the Johannine letters belong together as a sub-collection within the broader New Testament (largely due to shared literary features and theological emphases), and the second being to offer what are essentially chapter-length commentaries on each text. In his own words, he seeks "to introduce the context and content of the Catholic Epistles while, at the same time, emphasizing how all seven letters are connected to each other as they stand in the New Testament" (6). Lockett sees these letters not a disjointed series of latecomers to the canon, but a coherent collection that has a unified vision and witness, especially relative to their concern for the connection between orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Each of the book's six chapters deals with a particular text (2-3 John are combined in one chapter), and Lockett begins first with James, which he sees as connected to Jude at the end, as intentional bookends to the collection. Each chapter generally proceeds in the same fashion, mirroring what readers would find in a typical commentary. That is, Lockett begins with background issues such as occasion and setting, dealing with questions of authorship (often quite a lively discussion, given that the authorship of every Catholic Epistle is disputed), audience, and genre, and then provides information on the structure and outline of each letter before offering section-by-section commentary. When it comes to the background issues, Lockett leans toward a fairly conservative side of the spectrum but is open and fair to more critical views. In his chapter on James, his observations about the phrase "implanted word" in James 1:21 (23-24), and the perennial controversies over the relationship between faith and words in James 2:14-26 (30-35) were most helpful.

In chapters two and three Lockett offers an analysis of the Petrine Epistles, beginning by noting a series of parallels between 1 Peter and James, from their audiences to their emphases to their scriptural citations. Regarding 1 Peter, some of his best insights come from his commentary on the series of texts about submission to different authorities in 1 Peter 2:13-3:12 (73-81). Lockett's careful attention to sensitive matters of context (such as the position of women within the Roman Empire) was refreshing. Regarding 2 Peter, Lockett argues that despite questions often leveraged by scholars about its authenticity, 2 Peter was originally intended to be read alongside 1 Peter and that reading the two as a canonical pair and as a "coherent narrative, readers come to appreciate a distinctive Petrine Christology that emphasizes the revelation of Jesus' eschatological glory at the transfiguration and his second coming (2 Peter) alongside the atoning nature of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection (1 Peter)," so that both can be seen as "a twofold witness to Peter's teaching" (96).

Chapters four and five deal with the Johannine Epistles, with Lockett again beginning by noting the importance of canonical placement to interpretation, observing how 1 John shares certain emphases with 2 Peter as its canonical predecessor. Regarding 1 John, Lockett's discussion of the rather difficult saying about "water and blood" in 1 John 5:6 (162-163) was instructive, as was his focus on elements of hospitality throughout the chapter on 2-3 John. Lastly, Lockett turns to Jude, paying special attention to the urgency of the letter's language, and the consistency of its appeal to

apostolic authority. Some of his most insightful comments involved Jude's intentional use of certain terms (such as the verb "to keep") at certain points in his letter (195, 207). Lockett's final concluding section seeks to draw together common threads from the commentaries on each letter, again highlighting how he sees all seven as functioning in a coherent collection.

Lockett's work has much to commend it. While intended for a more academically inclined audience, the book is not particularly technical (footnotes are kept to a minimum, and Greek terms are transliterated), and would perhaps be best used as an introductory text. At the end of each chapter Lockett includes what he sees as the most useful resources for further reading on each text, and this appeals to readers who may be less aware of recent trends in scholarship. In my view, the most helpful part of the book were the eight excursus sections, labeled "going deeper," which offered detailed explanations of more difficult exegetical questions such as how readers can understand Jude's use of 1 Enoch, or whether or not 2 Peter should be classified under the literary genre of a "Testament." Readers of these letters will certainly benefit from Professor Lockett's careful and thoughtful approach to these texts.

A Stone in My Shoe: Confessions of an Evangelical Outlier

J. Michael Walters

Eugene, OR: Resource Publications

2021, 202 pp., paper, \$20.00

ISBN: 978-1-6667-0198-2

Reviewed by Scott Donahue-Martens

A Stone in My Shoe: Confessions of an Evangelical Outlier is a breath of fresh air for the evangelical movement. Written by a committed evangelical Christian, the book grapples with a series of divisive topics openly and honestly. J. Michael Walters describes the discomforts that many evangelical outliers feel. He writes with love and care for the Church, especially as he describes his position as an evangelical outlier. That is not to say that he claims to be outside of the evangelical movement. Rather, the outlier perspective from the margin is still an evangelical perspective. Walters hopes that more than one kind of evangelical can exist. He invites

the reader to consider how the term evangelical has become narrowly defined such that many who ascribe to the central tenants of evangelicalism are pushed to the margins. The book describes a hope that evangelicalism can broaden again so that there is room within the movement for a variety of faithful expressions of Christian discipleship.

Chapter one provides a working understanding of what it means to be an outlier and why Walters identifies as one. The chapter embraces an ecclesiological approach to theology, especially claiming that uniformity is not an ecclesial goal. The second chapter brings a missiological ecclesiology into conversation with the failing North American Church. Rather than ignore current trends like decreased church participation and church closures, Walters addresses the need for change within the church. With attention to the modernist-fundamentalist controversies of the 20th century, the third chapter discusses how evangelicals approach the Bible. Walters describes a Jesus-centered hermeneutic which liberates scripture from the confines of modernity and enables scripture to do what it does best in revealing God to us. The next few chapters complexify ways evangelicals understand evangelicalism, sex, politics, America, and science. Evangelicals will readily recognize the contentious ways these subjects have functioned as lightning rods within the movement. By walking a mediating path, Walters speaks with biblical wisdom and theological sophistication on each of these topics.

Readers looking to put the book into a box with prescribed categories will be sorely disappointed as the work continually points to various intricacies on each of these topics. The humility with which the controversial topics are presented prevents the book from coming across as a diatribe. It is truly an invitation into a theological conversation where there are no easy answers. The book speaks prophetically about the evangelical movement, especially by naming missteps. These prophetic utterances are rooted deeply in pastoral concerns and are a form of evangelical accountability. Perhaps, what Walters accomplished so well is to “talk honestly about certain issues” when far too often talking about divisive topics within evangelicalism gets a person “branded as somehow suspect” (6). His background as a pastor and professor makes him an apt conversation starter for this work.

One of the strengths of this book is the way Walters leverages his pastoral and academic backgrounds. Rather than isolated domains, Walter weaves aspects from the church and academy together in order to avoid the

limitations that an over-emphasis on one all too often yields. The result is an informed mature pastoral book that invites readers into a deeper relationship with Christ, especially through Christ's Church. While the book is not an autobiography, Walters recounts personal experiences and stories from his life. These illustrate the major points and point to the contextual nature of theology. This contextual nature is a gift to the evangelical movement which, with too great frequency, avoids the situational nature of theology.

A Stone in my Shoe could be helpful in several settings. It might serve well in practical theology or as an introduction to theology classes, in addition to classes that consider the evangelical movement. Congregations looking for material that invites them into a challenging reflexive conversation can learn from the contents and methods of the book. The book can guide evangelical pastors, including youth pastors, in theologically thinking through relevant challenging topics. As a former student of Walters, it was a joy to be influenced once again by him through this book. I recommend it to anyone looking to have an open and honest conversation about the nature and status of the present evangelical church.

Interpreting Paul: The Canonical Paul

Volume 2

Luke Timothy Johnson

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans

2021, 616 pp. hardcover, \$60.00

ISBN: 978-0802824660.

Reviewed by Benjamin J. Aich

Luke Timothy Johnson argues throughout *The Canonical Paul* that the construction of Paul, as explored in his first volume (*Constructing Paul*, 2020), and as quoted in his second volume (*Interpreting Paul*), “ought to lead, not to a fixed and final edifice or monument called ‘Paul,’ but rather to a ‘deconstruction’ consisting of discrete and nonsystematic inquiries into the [thirteen] letters themselves, in relation to each other, and in conversation with contemporary concerns of believers” (2). *Interpreting Paul* offers twenty-three examinations of this sort, ten of which are new, in order to encourage further such studies for the life of the church. Instead of summarizing each essay/chapter (as available in other reviews and to

some extent in Johnson's conclusion [498–500]), this review will focus on portions of the book that model Johnson's primary thesis and goal, attend to areas with weaknesses, and conclude with some general remarks, especially those on the prospects of future similar research projects.

Concerning the modeling of his thesis and goal, Johnson is to be commended chiefly in two aspects. First, his arguments hold concepts and textual threads together in the interpretation of Paul's Epistles that are often too effortlessly separated (whether on account of facile systematization or otherwise). Examples of this initial acclamation include, but are not limited to, chapters two, three, nine, twelve, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, and twenty-one. Chapter two ("The Social Dimensions of *Sōtēria* in Luke-Acts and Paul") explores the social dimensions of salvation in Luke-Acts and Paul and holds these authors together, demonstrating the ideological continuity between them (though ironically without evidence from the Pastoral Epistles). Chapter three ("Transformation of the Mind and Moral Discernment in Romans") shows that in Paul, pneumatology, and ethics are inextricably linked. The only surprise here is Johnson's lack of engagement with Craig S. Keener's *The Mind of the Spirit* (2016). Chapter nine ("Ritual Imprinting and the Politics of Perfection") focuses on ritual (esp. baptism) in Galatians and Colossians, offering a unique comparative analysis that illumines strikingly similar Pauline responses to those inclined toward further, superfluous ritual initiations in these epistles. Chapters twelve ("Paul's Vision of the Church"), eighteen ("Discernment, Edification, and Holiness"), and nineteen ("The Apostle as Crisis Manager") exhibit the overarching thematic unity across the *Corpus Paulinum* vis-à-vis ecclesiology and pneumatology. Finally, chapters twenty ("*Oikonomia Theou*") and twenty-one ("The Shape of the Struggle") bring the oft-neglected 1 Timothy into enlightening conversations with other Pauline Letters, most vividly 1 Corinthians ("*Oikonomia Theou*") and Galatians ("The Shape of the Struggle").

Second, Johnson consistently and rightfully reads Paul's Epistles with a view toward their actualization in the lives of present-day Christians. Instances of this commendation are particularly apparent in chapters four, five, six, eight, eleven, fourteen, fifteen, and twenty-three. Chapters four ("Life-Giving Spirit") and five ("The Body in Question") combine to inspire believers to identify themselves as partakers of a new humanity who thus operate like the Body of Christ is not merely a metaphor but much more so the Spirit-energized assembly of the living God and the eschatological expression of the risen Christ. Chapter six ("Glossolalia and the

Embarrassments of Experience”) provides a sober assessment of the gift of tongues, helping the church not to discount this charism or reject its validity but to contextualize it historically. Chapter eight (“Truth and Reconciliation in 2 Corinthians”) contains several implications for practical application in the church, mainly regarding how reconciliation can be realized through shared mission. Chapter eleven (“The Expression of Christian Experience”) contains one of the better cases for understanding *pistis Christou* (cf. Gal 2:20) subjectively as “the faith of Christ,” which is the impetus for the faith/allegiance of believers and the quintessential representation of the life of love they display by the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:6). Chapter fourteen (“Fellowship of Suffering”) proposes a compelling reading of Philippians that ought to encourage churches to jettison competitive rivalries and instead embrace the mind of Christ. Chapter fifteen (“Mystery and Metaphor in Colossians”) urges believers to embrace all that has been given to them through baptism into Christ (cf. chapter nine). Lastly, chapter twenty-three (“The Pedagogy of Grace”) proclaims a potent message from Titus, namely that humans desperately need an inward transformation made possible by God’s grace and love for civilization to flourish.

This volume has remarkably few weaknesses considering its magnitude, although they are present. First, Johnson’s desire to interpret Paul for the life of the church sometimes involves, ironically, readings that either misrepresent or underrepresent the views of numerous Christians across the globe. For example, while chapter sixteen (“Doing the Truth in Love”) may initiate several profitable exchanges regarding human sexuality, Johnson’s imprecise critique of Christian conservatives therein will allow such talks to commence only with great difficulty (see esp. 318). In this same essay, Johnson may also frustrate many Christian scientists and philosophers with his nebulous appeals to science and experience; an updated edition of this chapter might be enhanced by citing recent publications, e.g., from the *Journal of Family Psychology, Science*, or the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. A second weakness is that Johnson at times makes his most essential points with false either-or scenarios. For instance, in chapter two, salvation in Luke-Acts and Paul is argued to consist of present and social components *rather than* future and individual ones (39, 44), whereas Johnson must later, and inconsistently, admit that it involves these present social elements *more than* future individual ones (47). And in chapter ten (“The Truth of Christian Experience”), Paul’s pastoral interest

in Galatians, though with valuable nuance, is presented over against the theological concerns of the letter (186).

Overall, however, Johnson offers a unique and crucial scholarly voice in these essays. He refuses to allow the widely held division of the thirteen Pauline Epistles into the categories of “undisputed” and “disputed” (cf. the outmoded and unhelpful division at the SBL Annual Meeting) to prevent him from allowing the texts themselves to speak on their own terms. His work exemplifies canonical, inductive Bible study for the church, thus making it an invaluable resource for students, scholars, and clergy.

Furthermore, and corresponding to his aims, he resists systematizing Paul’s Letters and theology. This point leads me to consider future related academic research prospects. Readers familiar with the imperious work of the late James D. G. Dunn (*The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 1998) might be disappointed to find that Johnson does not provide substantive interaction with it, despite clearly objecting to several of its foundational elements in his introduction (e.g., using Romans as a framework for Paul’s theology). This omission may be justifiable since persons piqued by this tacit conversation may find traces of it in Johnson’s first volume. Nevertheless, given Dunn’s enduring influence on Pauline studies, it would be necessary to bring his work into a more profound dialogue with Johnson’s, principally if the latter is to disabuse scholars of following the more systematic “Dunnian” way. One exciting avenue for such a proposal would be to write various “theologies of Paul” that, unlike Dunn’s, incorporate *all thirteen Pauline Epistles*, both undisputed and disputed, in order to decide whether these are comparable to Johnson’s work in terms of their explanatory power. Such studies would benefit the guild and the church, notwithstanding how they would have to confront the apparent incongruities between the letters. For, as rewarding as Johnson’s text is, it is unlikely at this point to serve as a clarion call for scholars to forfeit all notions of “Paul’s theology” or even “New Testament theology.”

