

## BOOK NOTES

**Considering the Great Commission: Evangelism and Mission in the Wesleyan Spirit**

**W. Stephen Gunter**

*Nashville: Abingdon Press*

*2005, 335 pp., paper, \$33.00*

*Reviewed by Kenneth J. Collins*

Exploring the themes of conceptualizing, contextualizing, and practicing the great commission, this volume had its origin in a consultation on evangelism that took place at Emory University in spring 2002.

When read carefully and critically, the arguments of this collection of essays can be understood on two levels: the first one entails a positive statement of the hope and promise of evangelism in an increasingly complex and pluralistic world. Reacting to the criticism often found on the boards of mainline denominations such as “Christian expansion is an embarrassing remnant of colonial history,” several essays fail to move beyond these polemical concerns to note in a positive and careful fashion what good effects Christian evangelism has brought about in the past. Indeed, this first level of analysis falters because its vision, with but a few exceptions, does not go back any further than the twentieth century. In other words, what Wesley and Whitefield did right in the eighteenth century and what Finney and Palmer did in the nineteenth is hardly considered at all. Moreover, what contemporary analysis is offered does not grapple seriously with the demographics of evangelism in terms of both birth rates and immigration patterns in the changing composition of world Christianity. Thus, the task of contextualizing the great commission, celebrating a *particular* contemporary social location of interpreters, dominates the work such that a proper conceptualization of the great commission never really emerges.

The second level of analysis, what constitutes the subtext of many of the essays, constitutes little more than the stereotypes and caricatures that have been offered by the New Left in its criticism of Christian evangelism, especially when undertaken by evangelicals. Thus, several essays develop

an ongoing critique against “simply declaring Jesus as personal Savior,” or mere “verbal proclamation,” or “simply saving souls,” such that by the time the reader grapples with the concluding comments of the volume against “mere conversion,” it becomes clear why several, though not all, of the authors neither understand the promise of evangelism nor the beauty and integrity of conversion as well. Indeed, there is nothing “mere” about being converted to Jesus Christ. To misprize this is to misunderstand what should be at the heart of the great commission, that is, making disciples of Jesus Christ.

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### **Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality**

**S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., ed.**

*Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press*

*2002, 285 pp., paper, \$17.95*

*Reviewed by Kenneth J. Collins*

Participating in the recent trend of assessing the impact of the eastern fathers on John Wesley's thought, S.T. Kimbrough, Jr. has edited a volume of articles drawn from scholars of both traditions on the topic of spirituality. Though it is claimed in the Forward of the book by an Eastern Orthodox writer that there is “striking similarity between the two traditions,” readers may yet come to a different conclusion by the end of this work in the face of the hard evidence—or the lack thereof. Indeed, several of the contributors freely admit that a direct influence of the eastern fathers on Wesley's thought is not extensive and is actually difficult to substantiate. Indeed, in what is surely the best essay from the Wesleyan side of the conversation, Professor Richard Heitzenrater essentially debunks some of the reigning myths on this topic and points out that there are very few references in Wesley's writings to his having read the Fathers, much less eastern ones. Moreover, no references in Wesley's diary to reading any of the Fathers emerge after 1741, and contrary to popular belief, the most frequently mentioned church father in Wesley's writings turns out to be not an eastern father at all, but the Latin writing Augustine! All of these stubborn facts have led Heitzenrater to question the level of Wesley's reliance upon and knowledge of the primary sources, especially of the Eastern Church—an observation that other Wesley scholars have been making for years. All of this careful scholarship is undoubtedly deflating to the major theme, especially since Heitzenrater's contribution comes at the beginning of the volume rather than as a conclusion. For the most part the subsequent essays are left with simply a more general discussion on doctrine or with noting the similarities between the life and

practices of John Wesley and various eastern fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa or Isaiah Sectis— neither of whom, by the way, Wesley scholars are certain that Wesley even read.

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### **Orthodox and Wesleyan Scriptural Understanding and Practice**

**S. T. Kimbrough Jr., ed.**

*Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press*

*2005, 330 pp., paper, \$17.95*

*Reviewed by Kenneth J. Collins*

This book of essays expresses the public conversation that has been taking place between Eastern Orthodoxy and Methodism and represents the fruit of two recent consultations. The volume is suitably divided into four main sections: 1) Orthodox Scriptural Understanding and Practice 2) Mutual Learning between Orthodox and Methodists 3) Wesleyan Scriptural Understanding and Practice and 4) Liturgy and Scriptural Interpretation.

The articulation of Eastern Orthodox Scriptural understanding and practice is ably accomplished in several essays. Among other things it is claimed that liturgy and Eucharist precede theology and doctrine; it was the church “that *decided* which books would form the canon of the New Testament,” and “icons [have] been found exceptionally efficient and effective for the dissemination of the profound meaning of the Christian message.” All of this is standard fare in terms of the Orthodox view.

What is surprising, however, especially for the Wesleyan reader is that the Eastern Orthodox narrative is essentially taken over, in modified forms in several essays, to express the Scriptural understanding and practice of Methodists as well. Thus, for example, a Methodist minister remarks: “We have seen that both the Methodists and the Greek Orthodox place prayer and worship above systematic theology. Both express thought in praise. Both shun academic theology for mystical liturgy.” And again, “In Methodism and in Greek Orthodoxy, systematic theology and dogmatics are played out within the realm of liturgy.” However, such claims correspond more to the current climate of ecumenical thinking than to the historical record (embracing doctrine, life and practice) of Methodism itself. Indeed, what this volume lacks is a capable and articulate presentation of the Reformation origins of Methodism in terms of its orality and how this sixteenth century context helped Wesleyans not only to contemplate the significance of the Word of God in terms of Jesus Christ, Scripture and public proclamation, but also to view that same Word of God at the heart of its liturgy.