Theological Reflections 23.2 (2025) 150-153
https://doi.org/10.29357/2789-1577.2025.23.2.10

Review of *Handbook on Postconservative Theological Interpretation*

Handbook on Postconservative Theological Interpretation. Edited by Mark A. Lamport & Ronald T. Michener. Cascade Books, Eugene, OR: 2024; Kindle Edition, $25.03 USD.

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There are major issues confronting the Christian Church in general and the Evangelical wing in particular. An open split has emerged in the church, a division that is not only theological but also psychological. This split is clearly stated in the *Introduction* to this book by Professor John Sanders. He rightly claims that the psychological makeup of church members tends to be either *nurturant* or *authoritarian*. While the nurturant type is more open, friendly, pro-social, gracious, and egalitarian, the authoritarian type insists on strict obedience to rules and authority, imposes harsh punishments for rule-breaking in order to instill fear of future disobedience, and seeks to minimize disruptions in the hierarchy. These groups also approach the Bible differently. Nurturants see Scripture as a tool to shape communities and as a guide for pilgrimage, while authoritarians view the Bible as the ultimate rulebook, with clear instructions that are to be followed without question (35–36)[1].

The main problem is that many people—especially from younger generations who are leaving the church—fit more closely into the nurturant type. They find it difficult to accept what they regard as hypocritical and illogical biblical interpretations of the other group. With the advent of social media (particularly TikTok and Instagram), short testimonies from young people who cannot reconcile the story of God's love with biblical texts that promote violence, sanction slavery, or propose unjust eternal punishment in hell have become ubiquitous. Even a casual look at TikTok or Meta reveals powerful testimonies from those who left the church for these reasons. Meanwhile, the authoritarian group has become increasingly radicalized, and many have merged their religion with far-right political movements that openly advocate

1 Page numbers are from the Kindle edition and they might not correspond with the paperback/hardcover edition.

ISSN 2789-1569 (print), ISSN 2789-1577 (online)

authoritarianism, hierarchical structures based on race, sex, and "the right" religion, and are willing to use deceptive and violent methods to achieve those ends.

There is, however, a third group of people. They are religiously conservative and regard the Bible as authoritative for faith and practice, but they acknowledge the problems raised by the so-called nurturants. They reject foundationalist methods of theology and affirm that the constructive task of theology is never finished. They also reject the classical conservative evangelical notion of biblical inerrancy and accept that traditional beliefs can change in light of new insights (24–25). They share many theological ideas with the postliberal school of theology but, since they were never liberals, they have adopted the name *postconservative*. This book is their attempt to provide some answers—descriptive rather than prescriptive in nature—by "highlighting the variety of twenty-first century interpretive lenses, perspectives … that stretch the margins of classical, fundamental or conservative evangelical theology" (16).

They have largely succeeded in this task. This volume is:

a) *Theologically robust and almost encyclopedic in nature*. The first section, aptly titled *Postmodern Philosophical Interpretation*, provides an excellent account of contemporary philosophical issues in biblical hermeneutics. The second and third sections offer valuable insights into postconservative doctrinal (dramatic, incarnational, sacramental, etc.) and contextual (intercultural, postcolonial, race, gender, etc.) interpretations. The fourth section applies postconservative hermeneutics to Scripture and functions well in conjunction with the first section, while the fifth section is a brief but excellent attempt at pastoral application. Particularly noteworthy is the chapter on Trauma Hermeneutics (1006–1026).
b) *Student- and scholar-friendly*. While some chapters (especially in the first section) require readers to be relatively well acquainted with contemporary philosophical ideas—thus being more suited to those with, or pursuing, a seminary education—most are, though somewhat challenging, valuable resources for pastors as well as interested laypeople.
c) *Conceptually reflective and humble*. The book remains grounded in Orthodoxy while also attentive to the strengths of new and changing theological ideas and terminology. Its contributions are descriptive, diverse, and open, often implicitly serving as a call for further research.

While the authors and editors should be commended for their intellectual and spiritual rigor, certain tensions in the book could have been better addressed. For example, Olson, one of the luminaries of the movement, claims that postconservatives should not treat "traditional belief as binding even for evangelical Christianity except insofar as it is faithful to God's word" (p. 24). But if the Bible is open to interpretation,

how can one claim with certainty what is or is not faithful to God? Who has the authority to decide what constitutes faithfulness?

Moreover, some statements are not especially helpful. How does the so-called "religious turn" in postmodern thought (Ch. 7) benefit postconservative hermeneutics? How does Derrida's concept of apophaticity (183) or Caputo's insistence that "God does not exist; there is no God there" (191) strengthen a postconservative argument for orthodoxy or faithfulness to God? Similarly, in the chapter on Open and Relational Hermeneutics (Ch. 16) we read that "not all biblical portraits of God are accurate" (391) and that God "does not control the interpretation of events" (396), so Moses and others may have misheard or misinterpreted God when commanded to kill. But how do we know that? More importantly, how can we discern which stories represent misinterpretation and which do not? What does such a claim imply for the overall validity of the Old Testament narrative? The response given is far from satisfactory. The authors argue that another passage (2 Tim 3:16) says that all Scripture is God-breathed, but that this only means God that metaphorically inspired humans, who sometimes erred and sometimes did not (382). First, the text itself says nothing about metaphorical breath. Second, it is not clear how this relates to the claim that Moses and others occasionally misheard/misinterpreted God. Ultimately, the explanation reduces to this: when reading the Bible, we "seek a unified portrayal of God but understand that some biblical texts will not fit" (396). Here we encounter the crucial weakness of this approach: how do we know which texts "do not fit" and should therefore be excluded? Do we rely on reason, contemporary ethical philosophy, or some other criterion? The answer offered is: Orthodoxy in all its historical and global perspectives (29).

Orthodoxy provides a useful framework for some issues, but the central challenges remain unresolved. Why dismiss the interpretive framework of the authoritarians mentioned at the outset? Why reject the doctrine of hell? How should we grapple with biblical contradictions, or with texts that sanction slavery or command violence? Researching postmodern philosophy and hermeneutics without considering their more radical proposals is is almost an an intellectual exercise in futility. In other words, to reject foundationalism and embrace the openness of postmodern hermeneutics (drawing on Derrida, Caputo, et al.) while still tying oneself to Orthodoxy—however historically and globally/contextually construed—and affirming the authority of the Bible and its supposed univocality is akin to trying to have one's cake and eat it too. The editors and authors could have looked into other interpretative frameworks like late structuralism (Rene Girard or Roland Barthes) or Anglican and Eastern Orthodox postmodern theology (Rowan Williams, Catherine Pickstock, John Milbank, David B. Hart, Christos Yannaras, etc.) but that opportunity was missed.

The strength of this book lies in its serious recognition of the Bible's problems—especially those connected with the contemporary issues in the Bible interpretation—and the research put into answering those problems. Its weakness lies in the excessive,

unnecessary and almost arbitrary reliance—sometimes even uncritical reliance—on academically fashionable postmodernisms while not providing a sufficiently clear answer on how to use those postmodernisms as a tool to answer the problems of the Bible that bother many of the new generation of Christians in general and theologians in particular. Maybe another volume on interpretation might be needed some times later to more adequately answer those questions. In any case, despite these shortcomings, this is a serious book with a wealth of information that deserves to be a part of every theological library.

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Надійшла до редакції / Received 07.09.2025
Прийнята до публікації / Accepted 04.11.2025