

BOOK REVIEW

Wilhite, David E., *The Gospel according to Heretics: Discovering Orthodoxy through Early Christological Conflicts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015). xii + 290 pp. Pbk. \$22.99

Are heretics important? David Wilhite will convince you they are. For many in Christian theological studies, heretics are ignored or villainized. However, much like developments in narrative textual criticism, Wilhite finds that every voice matters in telling the story of how Christian thought developed. He explores early theological controversies to uncover the rich history and complex development of early Christology. Wilhite seamlessly weaves together a narrative of history, theology, ecclesiology and dramatic heresiology.

Having its infancy in Sunday school material, with subsequent well-researched scholarly materials added, Wilhite's book serves as a tour guide to the early centuries after Christ. In this second major monograph on early church writers, Wilhite offers readers an enjoyable historical presentation of the famous heretics. His historiographical method serves to separate myth and presumption from verifiable information. By stripping down to primary literature, Wilhite is able to describe more accurately individual heresies and the role they played in Christian history.

Wilhite first attempts to define heresy clearly, since it is a fundamental aspect of the book. Surprisingly, however, the task proves far more challenging than readers would expect. Wilhite points out that many researchers do not try and explain what orthodoxy or heresy is, but who is in a position to define it. The cliché is that the 'winners' are the ones who define heresy. However, Wilhite wants to look at matters of debate from the perspective of the so-called 'losers' (p. 13). Thus, for some readers, the challenge of not having a firm definition of heresy and orthodoxy, or heteropraxy and orthopraxy, for that matter, will seem problematic. Even the conclusion of the book still struggles to define these terms with the circular idea that 'orthodoxy is a response to

heresy' and 'heresy is an attempt at orthodoxy' (p. 247). It is interesting to note that Wilhite chooses not to interact more substantially with Adolf von Harnack, Walter Bauer or Bart Ehrman on these points. The current popularity of seeing a will-to-power by the proto-orthodox would have helped in defining the goals and established more clearly Wilhite's intentions of countering such positions.

Despite what some might view as a vague beginning, this lack of predetermined definitions, in fact, allows Wilhite to engage in a more historically sensitive inquiry (pp. 17-18). Freedom from the later defined boundaries of orthodoxy and heterodoxy enables Wilhite to ask questions of the evidence not frequently explored. When readers see what Wilhite is doing, they will appreciate the advantages.

The body of the book explores key figures, events and the substance of ten early christological controversies. Following a chronological order, the chapters are 'Supersessionism', 'Adoptionism', 'Docetism', 'Modalism', 'Subordinationism', 'Subhumanism', 'Dyoprosopitism', 'Monophysitism', 'Antirepresentationalism' and 'Reductionism'. For most readers, many of these debates, or at least facets of them, will be new. They represent intricate controversies requiring a mountain of theological jargon to maneuver through nuanced philosophical and anthropological considerations. Much to the aid of student readers, Wilhite demonstrates himself to be a very able and pedagogically sound teacher. Not only does he approach matters in a simple step-by-step manner, he includes numerous inset boxes defining terminology and figures (e.g. pp. 30, 49, 63, 70, 132-33). He also includes valuable charts (pp. 44, 72), and shows an apt skill at explaining complex ideas (e.g. pp. 162-65 on the *communicatio idiomatum*).

One great advantage of the book, likely a product of being first used for a lay audience, is the appeal of Wilhite's narrative. Readers are drawn into the micro matters of a particular debate, while also having macro developments indicated along the way. Like a good teacher, Wilhite demonstrates how the settlement of one controversy creates a pendulum swing towards another new controversy. This narrative flow illustrates to students the interconnections of the christological debates. Struggling against one controversy often results in overstatement that leads to a different error, such as the relationship between Modalism and Arianism, for example (see pp. 94-97).

More advanced readers familiar with these topics will be pleased with the willingness of Wilhite to end with provocative claims (p. 70).

In his historically-driven method, Wilhite gets at the heart of matters by dispensing with myth and commonly-accepted assumptions. So while Wilhite engages the Ebionite controversy, he is also willing to conclude that the Ebionites likely never existed as a distinct group. While all of his claims are well researched, the book is thankfully more than a compendium of other writers.

There are certainly numerous other strengths, but the book also contains some shortcomings. The most obvious of them is that the title of the book is inaccurate. Readers will soon become aware that the book is not directly about the 'gospel'. Yes, there are comments on and small sub-sections dealing with the 'gospel', but the overwhelming majority of the book is dedicated to christological debates. The titles of the ten chapters concern christological disputes and how the ecumenical councils and orthodox writers reacted to such controversies. A book titled with the word 'gospel' can sell well, but a more fitting title would be 'Christ according to heretics'.

Even though humor is used appropriately in the book (e.g. pp. 63, 75, 87, 106), there are points where it hinders the presentation. The introductory paragraphs to new chapters are written for shock-and-awe to intrigue readers. However, these opening sections lack an informative heading like the rest of the book with its headings and sub-headings to guide readers. At times it is unclear whose views are represented. There is a single comment in the introduction that the opening paragraphs are 'usually the view expressed about the heretic by the orthodox opponents' (p. 17). But without a sub-heading or further indication, it is impossible to know what 'usually' means, whether they are views of the ancient orthodox writers or Wilhite's.

Another oddity is the use of analogies in the book. Beginning students of Christology and Trinitarian theology will quickly learn the fallibility of using simple analogies. Many are already tired of hearing the unfortunate comparison between the infinite triune God and water, steam and ice. Moreover, Wilhite offers other unhelpful analogies and illustrations, which he recounts would be regarded as heretical by the ecumenical councils. Though he introduces new analogies, Wilhite admits they are erroneous, and he then offers improvements. Readers do not want to waste their time reading one analogy only to be followed by a better one a few pages later. Give the best at the start. However, if the analogy is not effective, then do not use it at all. I appreciate the

pedagogical concerns, but the analogies simply cannot bear the weight of teaching the Trinity.

The most problematic chapter is the last one. Being sensitive in critiquing a work is commendable, and I hope I am too, but the discussion of Muslim Christology seems to have gone too far. The socio-politically motivated deference betrays reluctance to offer scholarly critique. It seems there is a fear of repercussions if he were direct in his critique of Muslim thought. He is not without cause, however, as the political climate treats any action deemed insensitive as bigotry or even worse. However, this cannot hinder scholarly work.

In other sections, Wilhite allows the ancient authors to belittle and mock Sabellianism, a.k.a. the Clark Kent Theory of Jesus, even though Oneness theology still widely holds an equivalent position today. Also, Cyril is quoted to demean Nestorius. New chapters begin with negative quotations from the orthodox against the heresy or heretic, although not so with the beginning of the last chapter.

By changing his approach and method of engagement, Wilhite has drawn heightened attention to the sensitivity of the issue. He states that his goal was to emphasize the original agreements between Christians and Muslims. However, the long socio-political presentation does not enhance the heresiological study. Like the rest of the book, attention should have remained squarely on early primary texts. There was no need to tiptoe around American and Middle-Eastern political tensions.

A couple more points are worth noting, with both trying and failing to draw Muslim and Christian thought closer together. First, Wilhite posits a word-concept fallacy. He might be correct in saying that ancient Arabic did not have a single word that is dynamically equivalent to the English 'divinity', but it does not mean that the Arabic language, or the Arabian culture in general, is unable to express the concept of divinity. Muslim rejection of the Trinity should not be reduced to lexical matters. Muslim orthodoxy is better respected when one acknowledges that Arabic is competent to handle theological and philosophical concepts, but it is their free prerogative to reject the divinity of Jesus.

Secondly, Wilhite also creates a fictitious dialogue between an early rural Christian and a Muslim soldier. The dialogue tries to show that an uneducated Christian could have easily agreed to forced conversion given religious similarities. The dialogue is unhelpful. The dialogue does not demonstrate that Muslim and Christian religions are close to

each other. The story does not prove that the religious distinctions are more apparent than real. On the contrary, the trite presentation belittles the distinctive views of each religion.

Despite the above critiques, which are mainly located in one chapter, the overall book is highly recommended to a broad audience. I hope the book finds wide reception, as it draws attention to the often-neglected early centuries of christological debates. Interestingly enough, the debates are still alive today and play significant roles in social-relations controversies. The book would fit perfectly in an undergraduate course on either early Christology or church history. Likewise, it might be well received in a seminary course on christological considerations alongside books of systematic theology. Additionally, by the admirable pedagogical writing efforts of Wilhite, the book will also be enjoyed by armchair theologians desiring a well-researched and accessible book. Readers will enjoy learning far more than just *homoousios* versus *homoiousios*. Wilhite makes the early church controversies come alive and draws out the lasting impact they have on Christian orthodoxy.

Chris S. Stevens
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON