

The Theology of the First Christians, by Walter Schmithals. Translated by O. C. Dean, Jr. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997. Pp. xii + 396.*

The Theology of the First Christians traces the development of religious thought from the preaching of Jesus to the formation of the New Testament canon. Disavowing the possibility of grasping the history of early Christian theology in its totality, Schmithals focuses on "basic theological themes and decisions that are *signposts* of future theological developments" (p.x). In this highly idiosyncratic work, the author canvasses a vast spectrum of issues. This can already be seen by chapter titles which include "Jesus, Apocalypticism, and the Origins of Christology" (chap. 1), "Paul's Conversion Theology" (chap. 4), "Worship in Early Christianity" (chap. 10), "The Old Testament in the New," (chap. 15), "The Historicity of Ethics in Early Christianity" (chap. 17), or "The Origins of the New Testament" (chap. 18).

In his preface, the author acknowledges that his frequent departure from conventional views will be found irritating by many (p. xii). Indeed, this work represents such a bold collage of disparate materials, replete with daring conjectures and inadequately substantiated assumptions, that it is doubtful Schmithals will be followed by many in his conclusions. At best, one may treat this work as a collection of loosely related essays on the history of early Christianity where one may find stimulating (albeit frequently tenuous) treatments of issues discussed more thoroughly, competently, and plausibly by other authors. Nevertheless, Schmithals's work stands as a challenge for each student of Scripture to relate the various components of the New Testament writings into an integrated whole.

Andreas J. Köstenberger

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