

An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics: A Guide to the History and Practice of Biblical Interpretation, edited by Mal Couch. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2000. Pp. 371.*

The present volume, a collage of entries concerned with dispensational hermeneutics, contains chapters on "The Evangelical Doctrine of Inspiration and Inerrancy: Restated," "Systematic Theology and Hermeneutics," "The Early Church Fathers and the Foundations of Dispensationalism," and "Introductory Thoughts on Allegorical Interpretation and the Book of Revelation," to name but a few. While there are a few redeeming features, overall this is a rather curious piece of scholarship which is hampered by several severe limitations.

The first is the misleading title. No mention is made of the strong dispensational agenda pursued in the book (though the back cover acknowledges that "The contributors to this work hold that grammatical-historical interpretation is most carefully followed when the interpreter is informed by premillennial, dispensational theology"). Thus "evangelical" in the title really means "dispensational."

The meaning of the term "classical" in the title is unclear as well. Presumably this refers to a grammatical-historical type of interpretation that the contributors contend has been practiced throughout church history. But thus to privilege one school of interpretation in church history over all others is not only simplistic but also inaccurate, because it anachronistically views preceding interpretive efforts from a narrow dispensational grid without seeking to understand them first of all within their own frame of reference.

Second, the volume lacks a sustained editorial perspective. It apparently brings together a variety of partly previously published materials. As a result, the work does not flow well and consists of contributions that differ significantly in terms of quality as well as quantity. A rather drastic example is chapter 4, which in only four pages presents "Theological and Prophetic Systems throughout History." The lack of a unified editorial perspective is also reflected in the lack of a conclusion. The final chapter is "Is Ezekiel's Temple Literal?" which makes for a rather abrupt ending of the book.

Third, there is an obvious bias in the authors' presentation of opposing viewpoints. Here is their description of covenant vs. dispensational theology:

Covenant theology, contrary to the strong protest of the Reformers, interprets Scripture by allegorizing and spiritualizing portions of the biblical text. Dispensational theology, or dispensationalism, results from a natural, normal reading of Scripture, consistently taken in context and at face value. Such a reading is the logical and obvious way to read any body of literature (p.33).

The bias reflected in this kind of caricature renders the following treatment largely invalid at the very outset. For reasons such as these it will come as no surprise that I cannot recommend this book. There are much better treatments of the history of biblical interpretation as well as of dispensational hermeneutics than the rather disparate collage of materials gathered in the present volume. Contrary to the book's title, this is not "An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics," but a (rather partisan) presentation of selected issues in dispensational interpretation and theology.

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