

Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture, by Christopher Watkin. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022. xxiv + 648 pp. \$39.99.

Biblical Critical Theory is an unfortunate, frustrating title. Here, *title* is not a metonymy for the whole book—literally, it is the title of the book itself that is frustrating. The argument of *Biblical Critical Theory* will likely enrage anyone who embraces (what is normally meant by) critical theory. And those who instinctively reject anything called “critical theory” will end up ignoring (or slanderously misrepresenting) a valuable book that has much to commend it.

Broadly, critical theories examine the varied (and sometimes subtle) ways in which those in power reinforce their power. Even the most ardent conservative recognizes that people regularly use the influence they have to entrench their own advantages, both overtly and implicitly (think, perhaps, of corrupt politicians). For that reason, critical theories stress the perspectives of minority and disempowered groups. Those excluded from the seats of power are most likely to perceive the ways in which the system is structured to favor its designers.

Because Christians are most often not among the “wise according to worldly standards,...powerful, [or those]...of noble birth,” we are uniquely suited to critique the dominant culture of the age: thus, we have a *biblical* critical theory. Here, Watkin appropriates the Augustinian contrast between the City of God and the City of Man. It is self-evident that those of this age take for granted the wisdom of this age, building a society and culture that both assumes and reinforces its refusal to be ruled by Christ. The Christian, as an outsider to *the world* (in its full Johannine significance) and shunning the assumptions of the City of Man, should be able to identify the ways in which the world system expresses and fortifies itself—and to show the weaknesses, inconsistencies, and incoherencies of the world.

Watkin contends that to do this analysis well, we need to engage in “double listening” (a term he pulls from John Stott): listening (in Stott’s words) “to the Word with humble reverence” and “to the world with critical alertness” (25). In this, Watkin is committed to a Van Tilian apologetic. Immersing ourselves in Scripture *while* giving careful attention to the City of Man allows us to see the antithesis between Christianity and unbelief; it gives us a basis on which to offer a critical analysis or internal critique of unbelief.

Watkin’s introduction attempts (like many) a definition of *culture*. His preferred term to organize cultural analysis is *figure*. A figure is a particular perspective on experience; it involves seeing something *as* a certain kind of thing. He suggests “six broad categories of figures”: (1) language, ideas, and stories; (2) time and space; (3) the structure of reality; (4) behavior; (5) relationships; and (6) objects. These figures are not neutral; later in the book, he refers Pierre Bourdieu’s “pedagogies of insignificance”: “A whole cosmology is ‘writ small’ in the way we check our phones, cook our meals, drive our cars, or speak to our friends”

(471). Watkin rightly highlights the naivety of ignoring the ways in which these things shape a people.

The substance of the book takes up a biblical theological critique of our current moment (late modernity), setting it in contrast with Scripture's story from pre-creation (a discussion of the Trinity) through all redemptive history to the eschaton. In each chapter, Watkin stresses a move that he calls *diagonalization*. It is a form of argument heavily indebted to Chesterton: those of this age so often totalize some aspect of truth to the exclusion of another that, from a Christian perspective, is also true. The Christian answer (as Chesterton observes) is neither "an amalgam or compromise, but both things at the top of their energy" (19).

Watkin observes this diagonalization motif in a host of Christian theologians and apologists (17–19). One such expression to which Watkin returns is Daniel Strange's "subversive fulfillment." This is a wonderfully fitting way of expressing the genius of Van Til's apologetic: the unbeliever expresses his allegiance to *reason* and heaps scorn on the Christian for abandoning the mind. The Christian response is that the unbeliever is not wrong to desire rationality, but that (1) he cannot have rationality on his own terms, and thus (2) the only way to save rationality is to abandon his fundamental commitment to autonomy and to submit to Christ's Lordship. Thus, Christianity is both the subversion of the unbeliever's desire for rationality—and its ultimate fulfillment.

This mode of argument is repeated dozens of times throughout the book. As a model and program of cultural analysis, *Biblical Critical Theory* deserves a wide readership. The particular examples of Watkin's critiques, as well as the structure and pattern of Watkin's argument, are worthy of both contemplation and imitation. Conservatives who dismiss this work, some of whom have judged it entirely by its cover, are doing themselves a tremendous disservice.

Readers of this journal will likely find some of Watkin's critique unconvincing, for reasons both theological and political. Watkin rightly insists on the high importance of eschatology to cultural analysis. At one point, he notes the dangers of both over- and under-realized eschatologies (587ff). *Under* and *over* are, of course, relative terms; from a dispensational perspective, Watkin's applications are a model of over-realization; what Eric Voegelin refers to as "immanentizing the eschaton."

Presumably, he would consider dispensationalism, with its greater stress on the not-yetness of the kingdom, as a system of under-realization. And yet his description of proponents of under-realized eschatologies fails to account for key distinctions: "It is...the attitude that any change we may seek to bring about would never see the light of day and, even if it did, would never achieve our initial dreams for it.... It is the curl of the lip and the roll of the eye, the armchair cynicism that takes pot shots at those seeking to make a difference, however imperfectly, only ever lifting a finger to point it accusingly at others" (589).

This misses the mark, and the implications of it show up throughout the book. A notable example is found in his recurring reference to

the “logic of superabundance”: “a lavish, gracious, loving paradigm of excess” (248). He sees this superabundance in covenants, in the grace of God (which is not calculable in the mere transactional terms of the market [Rom 5:20]), and in the cross and resurrection. But note how he moves from this theology to its cultural application:

The superabundance of the cross disrupts and destabilizes the logic of totality, whether it is expressed in totalitarian government (the state as total) or the unfettered free market (the market paradigm as total).... They both begin with the assumption of scarcity and lack, rationing goods either through central distribution (the state) or through differentiated purchasing power (the market).... By contrast to both of these closed and totalizing paradigms, Christ brings not an economy of credit and exchange, but a divine overflow of love. Because it is an event, the cross confounds the necessity of the market in which every credit implies a corresponding debt, every transaction must be balanced, and every commodity or service has its equivalent value in every other commodity or service (422–23).

To be sure: grace is superabundant. And yet in this age, resources remain finite; they will be allocated *on some basis*. How shall that be done? The suggestion that the superabundance motif of grace and gospel is somehow an answer to the fundamental question of economics in an age in which scarcity and finitude remain quite with us strikes me as a quintessential example of over-realized eschatology, an application of future realities to the age in which creation will continue to groan until the revealing of the sons of God.

At base, the disagreement is captured in this sentence: “This makes of the resurrection a manifesto for social change” (442). There will be social change because of the resurrection—when the King returns.

But these suggestions are not a repudiation of the paradigm Watkin has set forth. He concludes about his project: “If you see something missing, add it; if you see something broken, fix it” (604). Where our theologies disagree, our critique of our culture will differ. But the task of a biblical critique of this age is an imperative one, and Watkin’s work is a profoundly helpful contribution to that task.

Michael P. Riley
Calvary Baptist Church, Wakefield, MI

The Case for Christian Nationalism, by Stephen Wolfe. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2022. 488 pp. \$24.99.

Stephen Wolfe has given a full-throated, tightly reasoned argument for the idea of Christian nationalism which he defines as “a totality of national action, consisting of civil laws and social customs, conducted by a Christian nation as a Christian nation, in order to procure for itself