

READING THE BIBLE SUPERNATURALLY? A REVIEW ARTICLE

by
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In his recent book *Reading the Bible Supernaturally: Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture*,² John Piper offers us an extended treatment of the doctrine of illumination (though he only occasionally calls it that). The title offers, in effect, his definition of illumination, viz., “reading the Bible supernaturally.” I did a double-take when I saw the title on a publisher table at ETS last year and immediately wondered about the provocative title. Was this another titillating but largely harmless title like *Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, or was there something more sinister here? Being aware of the intensifying battle to keep continuationism at bay in the evangelical community, I was suspicious. Not only was Sam Storms, at the very conference I was attending, using his platform as society president to leverage for greater sympathy toward continuationists in the evangelical scholarly community, but the leadership at Piper’s own church had recently gone on record as bent on becoming a more “functionally” “continuationist church.”³ Quests for the supernatural, the ecstatic, and the existential were on the rise and I wondered if this title reflected another step. I bought the book.

The introduction helped me to set my very worst fears aside. Piper assures his readers that the primary supernatural work he has in view is God’s regenerating impulse: God miraculously grants to his elect eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to embrace what they previously would not (25 *et passim*). He adds further assurances that he is not abandoning the “natural” reading of the Scriptures—what is “there” in Scripture has always been there, plain for all to understand, but rejected by all whose minds are not illumined (chaps. 3–5). Relieved, I settled back for a routine read about the doctrine of illumination, wondering vaguely how it could possibly fill 400+ pages.

My relief was short-lived. Having received these assurances, I arrived at what I believe to be the twofold thesis of the book under review: (1) that “our ultimate goal in reading the Bible is that God’s infinite worth and beauty would be exalted in the everlasting, white-hot

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²Wheaton: Crossway, 2017.

³<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/confessions-of-a-functional-cessationist>.

worship of the blood-bought bride of Christ from every people, language, tribe, and nation” (39) and (2) that this white-hot worship is realized in part through a continuing miracle called “supernatural reading.” I have tensions with both ideas.

The **first aspect of the book’s thesis**, something of a recapitulation of Piper’s earlier work, *A Peculiar Glory*,⁴ is developed in the opening two chapters. With typically Piper-esque animation, the author argues that “white-hot,” “visceral,” and “intense” worship marked by “energy, vigor, ardor, fervor, passion, zeal” is the only authentic variety (60). Based on the etymological argument that the “fervent” worship to which God calls us (Rom 12:11) is “boiling” worship, Piper maintains that the best and most authentic worship is the very most emotionally charged worship: “There is a correlation between the measure of our intensity in worship and the degree to which we exhibit the value of the glory of God” (60).

The quest for a “visceral” experience of God has dogged the evangelical movement from its inception, and its history is scarred by many disturbing waves of abuse. Despite recent attention to Jonathan Edwards’s distinction between religious *affection* and religious *passion* as the critical point of demarcation between true revival and madness, the evangelical community remains consistently susceptible to the latter. Evangelical worship, public or private, must be “white-hot,” “visceral,” and “intense,” and those who cannot produce (or fabricate?) such passions are marginalized with aspersions of inauthenticity. If, perchance, our prayers or our hymns or our Scripture readings produce only modest inclinations of the heart that lead to routine faithfulness, sobriety, quiet confidence, personal discipline, and service (boring!), then there must be something missing. Only the most passionate and ecstatic of experiences will do. Evangelical Christianity has, throughout its history, been disproportionately the purview of extroverts and existentialists—and this book will do nothing to remedy this troubling reality.

Please do not hear me saying that the act of Scripture-reading—truly an act of worship—may be reduced strictly to data transfer. It cannot be, and Piper’s plea for readers to read in ways that engage the affections is a welcome one. We *should* read with the goal of “seeing and savoring glory.” But we should also read in ways that encourage right reason, careful worldview development, sober behavior, and sound decision-making. After all, illumination is not only or even firstly about renewed passions, but also about a renewed mind and will. Now, to be sure, Piper allows for these other goals of Bible-reading; however, he places them emphatically below the stimulation of the passions as the primary purpose of reading the Bible (66). This is disappointing.

To the degree that I have concerns about imbalance in Piper’s expression of Christian religion, I necessarily find tension with the path to its achievement (the **second part of his thesis**)—which partakes, I

⁴John Piper, *A Peculiar Glory: How the Christian Scriptures Reveal Their Complete Truthfulness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016).

believe, of similar imbalance. Simply, his “supernatural reading” of Scripture is too existentially driven.

Firstly, I am concerned with the theologically distressed language that Piper uses for the inception of his “supernatural reading,” which Piper has identified as *regeneration*. Rather than an instantaneous event, regeneration appears as an extended process of faith “awakening” (38) that derives chiefly from a Christ encounter:

The peculiar brightness shines through the whole Bible but finds its most beautiful radiance in the person and work of Jesus Christ. My guess is that the vast majority of people who come to believe in the divine inspiration and complete truthfulness of the Bible come to this conviction through an irresistible encounter with Jesus Christ. The peculiar glory that authenticates the Bible shines first and most clearly in Jesus.

How does that happen? Sometimes it is one particular word or deed of Jesus that penetrates the heart and begins to shatter the hardness that hinders the light of Christ’s beauty. But sooner or later, it is the whole biblical portrait—climaxing in the crucifixion and resurrection—that conquers us and overcomes all resistance (26).

The language here bothers me. Not only does it require a Bible with uncomfortably bright red letters, but it also places such high priority on the Christ encounter that the Bible necessarily diminishes in authority: we know the Bible is true because of the experience rather than the reverse. Now, to be sure, Piper’s words do not reduce the Scripture to some sort of fallible Barthian *Hinweis* (Piper is nothing if not a firm inerrantist); still, one cannot help but hear echoes of existentialism.

Secondly, and most importantly, I am concerned about Piper’s understanding of the nature of the illuminating work as described in this book, reflected in his choice of the phrase “supernatural reading.” While it is emphatically true that regeneration is a supernatural event—a miracle—Piper’s corollary that the new life lived is a lifelong, iterative experience of miracles (or, to use Piper’s words in chap. 14, “acting the miracle”) is unconvincing.

We do well to know exactly what Piper says on this point, because the details are significant. Piper intimates that the difference between believers who read the Bible well and those who read it poorly lies in part in their failure to tap into the “supernatural,” noting that not only unbelievers but also believers need “ongoing supernatural help... repeatedly” to successfully read the Bible (192). He explains that believers must experience not only the initial miracle of illumination (i.e., regeneration), but also iterative “miracle[s] of special illumination” in order to discover the internal connections and implications in the biblical record (193)—miracles that Piper comes uncomfortably close to describing as “revelation” (194). A few chapters later, Piper commends a pattern of Bible-reading that he derives from 2 Timothy 2:7: as one “thinks over” Scripture (natural reading combined with reason), God responds with “supernatural” understanding that cannot be had by natural reading alone (240). The same pattern is repeated in chapters 15–20: as one engages in prayer and exercises faith and humility, God

responds with *supernatural* insights. What is distressing here is the failure to consider the possibility that the exercise of the believer's regenerate mind is itself the *providential* means that God has ordained for Christians to tap into the significance of Scripture. Piper consistently goes immediately to miracle, describing the gift of understanding as a supernatural response-act of God.

In reply, it is better, rather than regarding the new life as a perpetual series of miracles that can be triggered by natural activities, to see the new life lived as one lived "naturally" *from the standpoint of the new nature*. Having once performed the miracle of removing the veil from the believer's eyes, unstopping his ears, and inclining his heart to the Word once viewed with hostility, God works thereafter in believers by ordinary providence, or, in a word, *naturally*. In regeneration Christians receive everything necessary for life and godliness by virtue of their participation in the divine nature and the gift of God's Word (2 Pet 1:3–4), so that perpetual miracle is no longer needed (so the balance of 2 Peter 1). This understanding gives great relief to the Christian community: (a) less imaginative readers are relieved of guilt and frustration born from their inability to awaken the supernatural, while (b) more imaginative readers are preserved from the arrogance that proceeds out of their private perception/invention of the supernatural. These twin problems are the chronic bane of mysticism and pietism—and Piper, I fear, exacerbates them with his theory of illumination.

Having said all this, I concede that believers do not always use their opened eyes and ears consistently when they encounter the Word—Christians need to be trained to do this. And despite the shortcomings of his theory of illumination, Piper engages successfully in such training, especially in chapters 6–10. Believers *do* need to be reminded over and over again to read the Word with a view to its significance for their Christian experience: we must read with an eye not only to accumulating information, but also to knowing and loving God, to cultivating a biblical worldview, to applying his precepts and acting out his expectations with biblical wisdom in our disparate contexts, and so forth. To the degree that this book encourages these goals in readers of Scripture (and it does), it is quite helpful. To the degree that it encourages believers to look for fresh miracles to achieve these goals, its helpfulness diminishes.

My third and final concern with Piper's approach to illumination is cobbled from the final section of the book (chaps. 20–26). In these chapters Piper details some rudimentary principles of "natural" reading (i.e., hermeneutics) that provide the necessary setting within which God's supernatural aid takes place. These chapters are a welcome safeguard against the worst excesses that might have emerged out of Piper's theory, effectively delegitimizing "supernatural" readings that conflict with "natural" ones. Piper is relentless in affirming that feelings alone do not a correct reading make: appeals to supernatural reading are always tempered by natural ones.

Despite this refreshing emphasis, however, a major leak remains in Piper's hermeneutical boat. He begins by offering in chapters 20–21 a robust definition of *meaning* as authorial intent, then identifies the discovery of authorial intent as the “ordinary aim of reading.” He mutes the force of these excellent points, however, by affirming in the following chapter that there always exist in Scripture additional intentions—divine ones—that God makes the possession of the human authors by the miracle of inspiration, but of which he does not make them conscious (318–22). Piper recognizes the apparent anomaly of “unconscious” intentions, but dismisses it by pointing out that whenever someone speaks, his words always carry implications of which he is not conscious.

His explanation, however, is a flawed one. Put simply, *intentions* and *implications* are not the same thing. To use E. D. Hirsch's classic distinction, intentions lie in the realm of *meaning*; implications in the realm of *significance*. One is always conscious of the former, but not necessarily of the latter. Piper later acknowledges Hirsch's categorical distinction (379), but not here; instead, he explicitly defines “implication” as an instance of “fuller...meaning” (321)—meaning that cannot be fully realized through the “natural” and “ordinary” act of reading, but one that belongs to the believer, in the final analysis, only through an extraordinary, “supernatural encounter with God's word” (392).

In 1978, Daniel Fuller wrote an outstanding essay on the topic at hand, “The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation.”⁵ In it he opines correctly that

the Holy Spirit's role in biblical interpretation does not consist in giving the interpreter cognition of what the Bible is saying, which would involve dispensing additional information beyond the historical-grammatical data that are already there for everyone to work with. Rather, the Holy Spirit's role is to change the heart of the interpreter, so that he loves the message that is conveyed by nothing more than the historical-grammatical data.⁶

Casting illumination as a continuous miracle, emanating from a Christ-encounter, which offers greater cognition than that supplied by natural reading alone—for which Piper argues in the volume under review—may seem innocuous. However, left unchecked, this theory represents a door to theological errors as diverse as pietism and mysticism on the one hand, to existentialism, Gnosticism, and new orthodoxy on the other. This is a book that I cannot endorse.

⁵In *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation: Essays Presented to Everett F. Harrison by His Students and Colleagues in Honor of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford LaSor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 189–98.

⁶Ibid., 192.

