

William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*

Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture, by William C. Placher. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994. 188 pp. \$14.99 (paper). ISBN 0-664-25534-5.

Placher offers here a “sketch” of his christological ideas. His approach is encourage careful attention to the biblical narratives, particularly the gospel stories about Jesus. As a result, Placher understands these to reveal that God does not have to do so much with power as with love, which is risky, so that God is vulnerable to suffering. Moreover, the eternity of God has to do with the trustworthiness of God’s love, not timelessness, and the doctrine of the Trinity speaks of the inner mutuality of God’s love. Placher explores how the diverse and ambiguous endings of the gospels invite response and how the Savior relates to those who are vulnerable today. Finally, he examines the church as the community attentive to the narratives of vulnerability and willing to risk vulnerability.

Readers will find this book beneficial and provocative. Still, I would question Placher’s model of the vulnerability of Jesus simply revealing the vulnerability of God. Of course, Jesus was obedient unto death on the cross, refusing to save himself. The question is, What does that reveal? Martin Luther dealt with this long ago. The medieval church’s theology of glory understood the visible signs in this world to have a direct and positive relation to the invisible things revealed about God. Goodness in this world pointed to the supreme goodness of God; beauty indicated that the highest beauty existed in God. Luther proposed a theology of the cross, which said that God was revealed indirectly and paradoxically, under the sign of the opposite. In the *Heidelberg Disputation*, he focused upon the visible realities by which God has chosen to be known in the suffering, humility, and shame of Christ on the cross. In the *Lectures on Romans*, Luther wrote that God “has hidden His power under nothing but weakness, His wisdom under foolishness, His goodness under severity...and His mercy under wrath.” Placher is advocating a return to a doctrine of revelation based on a direct and non-paradoxical relation of signs (albeit negative ones) to divine realities, so that human weakness points beyond to divine weakness, and vulnerability reveals only vulnerability. It is not convincing that this is what the biblical narratives mean.

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