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*Dynamic Oneness: The Significance and Flexibility of Paul's One-God Language*

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Suzanne Nicholson is Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Malone University in Canton, Ohio, and is an ordained deacon in the United Methodist Church. *Dynamic Oneness* is the published version of her 2007 doctoral dissertation written under the supervision of Professor Loren Stuckenbruck. In it she argues against the idea (one that has become commonplace among Pauline scholars) that Paul's theology takes a back seat to his christology, soteriology, eschatology, ecclesiology, and ethics because it is taken for granted rather than outlined explicitly. She contends that "Paul's understanding of God was never merely an assumption, but rather provided a conscious foundation that intentionally shaped the rest of his arguments." (2)

Nicholson examines three texts: 1Corinthians 8:6, Galatians 3:20, and Romans 3:30, noting, as the subtitle of the book indicates, the significance and flexibility of Paul's "one-God language" in these passages. In all three passages Paul draws from that great Jewish monotheistic confession of faith, the Shema. Nicholson rightly contends that biblical monotheism, and thus the monotheistic faith of Israel, was not so much concerned with numerical oneness as it was YHWH's uniqueness. In line with Richard Bauckham's presentation of "unique divine identity" or N. T. Wright's "covenantal and creational monotheism," (as well as Larry Hurtado's emphasis on exclusive devotion) Nicholson understands Paul's "one-God language" to have reference to "the specifically Jewish understanding of the one God, Yahweh, who is the unique creator, sustainer, and ruler of all that exists and who has determined to have a special relationship with Israel, which includes Israel's exclusive devotion to Yahweh." (7)

Paul's "one-God language" is dynamic in that it underlines various points that Paul wishes to make, none of which are concerned with God's numerical oneness. In 1Corinthians Paul's concern is ethical. "For Paul, love of the one God is inextricably bound together with love of others. The Corinthians have not made this connection, and so Paul must correct their theology in order to correct their ethics." (103) In Galatians 3:19-20 Paul's point is that Christ's mediation is superior to that of Moses' because Moses was not of the one God as Christ was, but again, Paul's concern is not numerical oneness nor is it the deity of Christ, rather it's the continuity of God's plan in salvation history. In Romans 3:30 the emphasis is on God's impartiality; he is the God of the Gentiles *also* while *still* being the God of the Jews. Paul's "one-God language" here emphasizes God's universalism (by which Nicholson means his offer of salvation to all people groups, Jew and Gentile).

Throughout these chapters Nicholson makes her case persuasively while highlighting that for Paul God and Christ define one another (see pp. 34, 35, 75, 90, 91 n. 180, 104, 162, 166, 169, 214-15, 219, 220, 238, 239, 240, 245, 247, 248). Paul presents them as having overlapping functions, he applies OT YHWH texts to Jesus, he uses the terms "Spirit of God" and "Spirit of Christ" interchangeably (e.g., Rom. 8:9-11), and ultimately sees God's work accomplished in Christ. For Paul Christ is included in the unique divine identity. Reminiscent of Gordon Fee, Nicholson is correctly emphasizes that "[n]owhere does [Paul] formulate a Nicene-style definition of ontological divinity. But this does not mean that he had not contemplated God's identity in light of the Christ event." (86) And also that "it is true that the theological understandings of the incarnation and the Trinity are developed into a *formal* creed only at a later date; the confessional language that Christians still use today did not gain its structure until the fourth century at Nicea. Nevertheless, this does *not* mean that corresponding ruminations were absent from Paul's writings, or that the churches to which he wrote completely lacked any consideration of such possibilities." (242)

Other positive features of *Dynamic Oneness* are Nicholson's examinations of other passages in the books she is covering in each chapter. In other words, 1Corinthians 8:4-6 isn't treated without reference to Paul's entire argument in chapters 8-10, or without placing it within the context of 1Corinthians as a whole. So on and so forth for Galatians and Romans. However, this isn't to say that her work couldn't stand some refinement in some areas. For example, when she turns to passages that appear to imply a hierarchy between Jesus and God (pp. 91-102), she persuasively shows that 1Corinthians 3:21-23 isn't concerned with hierarchy but actually shows that all things are grounded in God. This is keeping with the theocentricity of the entire chapter. Likewise, she makes a good case that 1Corinthians 11:3 "focuses on the interdependence of men and women, rather than on a hierarchical or egalitarian structure," and that "this argument for interdependence makes more sense of the almost circular Christ-man/man-woman/God-Christ

structure than does a hierarchical perspective." (97) But when turning to 1Corinthians 15:27-28 Nicholson is less convincing in arguing that "[b]y subjecting himself, Christ is returning to the source from which he came. Christ confirms in his subjection that his sphere of reality belongs within God's sphere of reality—there is no separation between the two. He is, in a sense, returning home. And thus, God is found to be 'all in all.'" (101) True as this may be, and I'd agree that it is true, it doesn't negate that there is *some sort* of hierarchy in view here.

Something also must be said for the way that Nicholson writes; her prose is simply wonderful! It's not every day that one reads a doctoral dissertation and is captivated by the exegetical portions; in fact, those are usually the most boring and tedious parts of the book. Not so with Nicholson; her writing style keeps the reader interested while not sacrificing any of the exegetical rigor that one expects from such a work. She's well informed on the textual, cultural, and historical issues related to the passages she examines and she shows an impressive familiarity with both primary and secondary literature. However, one notable exception from Nicholson's footnotes and bibliography is Anthony Thiselton. Most major commentaries on 1Corinthians are referenced but for some reason Thiselton's is not. I don't believe that this detracts from her overall argument but I did find it a curious omission. A 16 page bibliography, 4 page subject index, 4 page modern author index, and 19 page ancient source index round out this wonderful volume. Students of Pauline theology/christology would be served well by making *Dynamic Oneness* a part of their libraries. I highly recommend it!