



**Placher, William C.**

*Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith*

Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001. Pp. x + 230.  
Paper. \$24.95. ISBN 9780664223915.

Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

In 2007 William Placher wrote a short book on the Trinity called *The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology*. It was easily my favorite book of the year as shown in the perfect five star rating that I gave it in my review. Placher died the following year and upon hearing the news I purposed to read more of his writing. Aside from a couple of articles, *Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith* is only the second significant piece of work that I've read by him. Given my previous experience with Placher I was taken aback by just how underwhelmed I was with this volume, although I'll allow that maybe he got his act together in the six years between publications.

This volume is divided into four nearly equal parts (Incarnation; Ministry; The Cross; and Resurrection). Placher does well to affirm important tenets of orthodoxy such as the doctrine of the Trinity; the Incarnation of Christ; the Hypostatic Union; and the bodily Resurrection of Christ. He also does well to bring the thought significant theologians (e.g., Calvin; Aquinas; et al.) to bear on his theologizing. And I can even commend him on purposely writing this book so that it could be understood by anyone who wanted to understand it, which is the say that he's a believer (as am I) that if you explain what you're saying as you're saying it, then people (no matter their training or lack thereof) will get it, which consequently makes it a fairly quick read.

But if I'm honest, the portrait of Jesus that Placher paints is more of a liberal mainline Protestant than it is of the Lord encountered in Scripture and the experience of salvation. Placher's Jesus is a non-violent gay-affirming egalitarian do-gooder whose mission in life is to fight the powers that be (no matter who or what those powers are) by condemning their self-righteousness all the while identifying with the marginalized and forgiving their wickedness on general principle. Placher is happy to affirm the Creeds while complaining that they jump from Incarnation to Passion without mention of ministry. Of course this only emphasizes how far we've come from Jesus' social activism and Christianity without activism is no Christianity at all. I can agree that faith without works is dead, but a working faith is manifested not in social activism *qua* activism; but in faithful obedience to the commands of God and Christ as revealed/received in Scripture.

The problems don't stop there; that's just the stuff that can be relegated to the "historical Jesus" (and I am pleased that Placher doesn't make hard distinctions between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith). When we get into the more theological stuff we have a Son who was truly separated from his Father on the cross; a God who suffers along with us; and a Father who isn't really a Father, but more of a parent, even though we can keep calling him Father for its vocative significance. There's also the out-of-place chapter condemning the American prison system and the manner in which Placher presents sinners as somehow victims in being separated from. He's fine with affirming that sin separates us from God, but he also says that "our suffering" separates us from God, but not to worry, he's been journeying with us the whole time anyway just waiting to bombard us with his love because God isn't angry at sin; he just feels betrayed.

Placher isn't bashful when it comes to taking firm stands on controversial issues like affirming same-sex attraction/intercourse, or condemning how we do prison in the US, but when it comes to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper he seems especially nebulous. The Lord's Supper means that Jesus is in *some way* present with us. Okay, but how? Doesn't every view of Communion affirm at least that much? Baptism isn't about what we do, but what God does. Okay, good and well, but aren't *we* instructed to baptize and be baptized? And for as much as he speaks of Christ's office as priest, his sacrifice for us, reconciliation, and redemption, I'm still not entirely clear on where he stands with regard to the atonement. Penal substitution? Moral Government? Christus Victor? Some mix-and-match theory of them all? I can't call it.

At the end of the day Placher spends too much time assuring us that we shouldn't take this or that literally (e.g., God's fatherhood or God's anger), or that the biblical writers knew nothing of our current hot button issues, for me to feel comfortable using this as a guide for what Jesus is supposed to mean for Christian faith today (or really at any time). What a shame.