

Book Review of Douglas Wilson's Reformed Is Not Enough

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Contemporary Reformed theology has become gnostic in recent years, argues Douglas Wilson in his latest book entitled, *Reformed Is Not Enough: Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant* (Moscow, Canon Press, 2002, 206 pp., \$14.00, paper). What does Wilson put forth in his book? There are positive things about his book; he affirms various orthodox doctrines and interacts with historic Reformed teaching. There are, however, negative things about this book. Let us therefore first turn to Wilson's case and then critique his arguments.

Wilson argues that Reformed theology has become gnostic in its belief that the invisible church is more significant than the visible church (pp. 70ff). This has happened as a result of the influence of enlightenment rationalism. In fact, Wilson builds on the current popular acronym *Truly Reformed* (TR) and argues that current Reformed thought should be labeled *Enlightenment Truly Reformed* (ETR). In contrast, Wilson argues that what is needed is a recovery of the historic Reformed faith as well as an improvement upon traditional Reformed concepts and doctrines (pp. 7-9). How does he propose to halt ETR theology?

Wilson argues that the remedy to this gnostic and rationalistic plague is recovering what he terms, "the objectivity of the covenant." Wilson means by this that we must view the church, not in terms of *visible* and *invisible*, but as the *historic* and *eschatological* church (pp. 70-74). First, by use of this distinction, an improvement upon traditional nomenclature, it removes the idea that what is invisible, or spiritual, is superior to what is visible, or material. Wilson's new terminology highlights the distinction between the present and final forms of the church—i.e., the mixed body of believers and non-believers and the church as the company of the elect. Wilson argues, that these terms keep gnosticism, or the exaltation of the immaterial, at bay. To support this concept, namely the *historic* and *eschatological* church, Wilson offers some practical and theological ideas.

The first solution that Wilson offers to combat gnostic Reformed practice is to take people at their baptism. Wilson argues that because ETR's value the spiritual more than the material, they ignore a person's baptism, their engrafting into the covenant, and search for the spiritual state of a person's soul (p. 34). Rather than trying to peer into a person's soul searching for faith, the gnostic immaterial realm, we must accept the face value of their baptism. Wilson carries this thinking into other doctrinal areas. The objectivity of the covenant, accepting baptism at face value, under girds his understanding of who may participate in the Lord's Supper. All baptized adults and children should be admitted to the table on the basis of their baptism, not a profession of faith (pp. 115, 185). This is not to say that Wilson has no place for a profession of faith. Wilson does argue, however, that emphasis must be placed on the objective elements of the covenant, what is visible,

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not on what is invisible. This view has implications for Wilson's understanding of the greater ecclesiastical picture.

According to Wilson, ETR's place too much value upon individualism, the *zeitgeist* of the day, and are therefore prone to sectarianism (p. 146). At the first sign of heresy ETR's break away from the church. Instead, we must accept a person's baptism, identify the sin or heresy, exercise church discipline, and fight for the truth (pp. 141ff, 196). Even if churches do not discipline heretics, we must remain. Wilson argues that church discipline is not of the *esse*, or being or essence, of the church but only for the *bene esse*, or well being, of the church. In other words, even if a church does not exercise church discipline, it is not one of the necessary marks of the church (pp. 145-46). Wilson argues that this whole process of staying within the church even when there is heresy and fighting for the truth is a necessary part of the corporate sanctification and justification of the church body.

ETR's focus on the invisible church and hence are always in search of a perfect church here on earth. Wilson argues that the church body is like an individual who must first be sanctified and finally justified. This is not a misstatement on Wilson's part; nor does this mean that Wilson rejects the traditional *ordo salutis*, or order of salvation. Rather, Wilson argues, based upon a sympathetic reading of N. T. Wright (p. 200, n. 2), that Scripture speaks of *justification* in more than one sense. Justification is not simply a forensic imputation of Christ's righteousness at the moment of a person's conversion. It is also the ultimate vindication and deliverance of God's people at the final judgment (pp. 175-76). In other words, the church will never be pure here on earth, nor can we know the state of someone's soul. Rather, we must hold fast to the objectivity of the covenant promise, our baptism, identify and fight sin, remain in the church, and await the final justification of the corporate body. Is Wilson correct?

Quite simply, Wilson's case fails on many fronts. Wilson states that being Reformed is not enough but in reality he is not familiar with the depth and breadth of the historic Reformed faith he claims to herald. To begin, Wilson hardly, if ever sites, any evidence to support his claims that the Reformed church is influenced by gnosticism and enlightenment rationalism. In fact, source-less assertions abound in this book, at least twenty-eight to my count (pp. 17, 21, 34, 40, 41, 43, 44, 51, 52, 53, 70, 85, 104, 132, 133, 146, 178, 183, 184, 189, 191, 192, 203). Among the host of claims of degeneration he sites only two sources, and at that, those sources are over one hundred years old (pp. 86, 183). This poor and irresponsible scholarship further evidences itself in Wilson's unfamiliarity with historical theology. Why, for example, are the terms *visible* and *invisible church* deficient? Why does Wilson not interact with their synonyms, the *ecclesia militans et triumphans*, the church militant and triumphant (see Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, q. v., *ecclesia*, p. 99)? Additionally, Wilson either ignores or has not thought through the implications of the alternative terms that he uses.

To use the terms *historical* and *eschatological church* roils the waters of this doctrine. The invisible church *is* historical. Moreover, the visible church *is* eschatological. In other words, to say that the company of the elect does not participate in history is an er-

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ror. Even those saints in heaven participate in history as they await the consummation of the age and the judgment of the wicked (Rev. 6.9-10). Also, to say that the company of the elect at this moment *in history* is not eschatological is an error. Wilson falls into the error of dispensationalism with his term *eschatological church*. It is dispensationalism that teaches that eschatology deals with the days immediately preceding the second advent of Christ (e.g. see Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 57-63). It is the insights of Reformed biblical theologians that have explained that the eschatological age has dawned with the first advent of Christ (e.g., Herman Ridderbos, *Coming of the Kingdom*). That means that the present visible church is a manifestation of the eschatological church. Indeed, the great eschatological prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel are being fulfilled at this very moment (Jer. 31; Ezek. 37; cf. John 3; Rom. 6-8). While we still await the consummation of this present evil age (Gal. 1.4), the eschaton has nonetheless dawned. These facts negate Wilson's pair of suggested terms. This flaw in Wilson's work, however, is small in comparison with his views regarding baptism.

Wilson's desire to make the backbone of the church baptism represents another error (pp. 187, 194). Though Wilson interacts with the Westminster Confession throughout his book, he fails to recognize what the divines identify as the backbone of the church: "The visible Church . . . consists of all those throughout the world that *profess the true religion*; and of their children" (WCF 25.2; emphasis). Notice that the divines state that the church's backbone is a profession of faith, not baptism. This is neither gnosticism nor rationalism; it is the historic Reformed faith. This is troubling because it was the Judaizers who placed emphasis on the sacrament almost to the exclusion of faith (Gal. 5.6, et al.). Moreover, when Wilson connects his views on baptism with the Lord's Supper, namely that any one who is baptized may take the Lord's Supper, even paedocommunion, he once again departs from the historic Reformed faith. The Westminster divines write that "*by faith* they [communicants] receive and apply unto themselves Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death" in the Lord's Supper (WLC q. 170; emphasis). This is not the only error in Wilson's book.

Wilson also commits an error by departing from the historic Reformed faith when he argues that church discipline does not belong to the *esse* of the church. Once again, the Westminster divines write that Christ has given the keys of the kingdom of heaven to the elders of the church and that they "have power respectively to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel, and by absolution from censure, as occasion shall require" (WCF 30.2). The divines base this doctrine upon Matthew 16.19 and 18.17, Christ's commands. How can Wilson therefore say that discipline is not of the essence of the church? He ignores the explicit command of Christ. The divines, not Wilson, set forth the historic Reformed faith and are faithful to Scripture. Moreover, it is a bit ironic for Wilson to urge people to stay within a church or denomination and fight heresy given his own sectarian setting in Moscow, Idaho. Let us turn to the last of Wilson's errors.

Wilson tries to make the case that Scripture speaks of justification in more than one sense and that the body of Christ awaits its ultimate justification (pp. 171, 177). This is Wil-

son's most egregious error. First, he has been influenced by N. T. Wright on this matter (p. 203); Wright constantly triumphs corporate justification. Yet, what seems to pass by Wilson's attention is the fact that N. T. Wright totally reconstructs the doctrine of justification. In fact, Wright denies justification by faith alone, a historic teaching of Reformed theology, and the imputation of Christ's righteousness (see N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, pp. 113-33; cf. Richard Gaffin, "Paul the Theologian," *WTJ* 62/1, pp. 121-29). Yet, Wilson pleads for a sympathetic reading of Wright (p. 200, n. 2). Moreover, Wilson confuses the doctrinal categories of justification and glorification. He also confuses issues of the *ordo* and *historia salutis*, or the order of salvation as it is applied to individuals and the unfolding of redemption in history, which typically involves the corporate body, in his discussion of justification (pp. 45, 175, cf. p. 74). Yes, the church will be vindicated at the consummation of the age but this vindication is typically discussed under glorification and under the *historia salutis*, not under justification and the *ordo salutis*. For the trained theologian, detecting these errors is not difficult. For the person in the pew, the target audience for Wilson's book, this confusion is misleading. Moreover, to plead for a sympathetic reading of N. T. Wright with little to no qualification or warning that he denies the historic Protestant faith is also very dangerous for the person in the pew.

We have only touched on the key points of Wilson's book. There are many other things with which we can take issue. For example, Wilson rejects Roman Catholic teaching on sacerdotalism (pp. 85, 104), yet he states that "the Westminster Confession taught baptismal regeneration" (p. 103); he has a confusing equivocation: "Judgment is salvation" (p. 177); he states that barrenness is a type for sin (p. 193); he states that good works "are the ground of assurance of salvation" (p. 172); and that order in the church is the mark of Pharisaic theology and not the "heroic disorder" (p. 83) that the church requires. Space does not allow us to examine these errors in detail.

In the end, the positive things about Wilson's book are outweighed by its negative aspects. Basically, Wilson tilts at windmills. He quixotically attacks ETR enemies that do not exist; and, if they do exist, he gives no evidence to support his claims. He claims to banner the historic Reformed faith, but we have demonstrated how he departs from it. What is most disconcerting is that he is leading people away from the historic Reformed faith. It was G. K. Chesterton who once wrote, "'The Christian ideal,' it is said, has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried." On a similar note we may write, The Reformed faith, it is said, has not been tried and found wanting; rather, Wilson is unfamiliar with it and therefore has left it untried. It is one thing to explore the breadth and depth of the Reformed faith based upon a thorough and careful exegetical, historical-theological, biblical-theological, contemporary-theological, duly annotated analysis, and then to offer correctives. Instead, all Wilson has done is pontificate upon that with which he is not thoroughly familiar. For these reasons, Wilson's book can not be recommended.