

Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008. Pp. 259. Retail Price: \$21.00

Koester's *The Word of Life* takes on a noble challenge: to make the gospel of John accessible and fruitful to a range of readers, both academic and "non-specialist" (xi). In many ways, Koester succeeds in wrestling this gospel into submission—that is, making it comprehensible without oversimplifying the theology. He remains respectful, both of the text and of the reader, and attempts to bring the two together. Overall, I think Koester accomplishes this task, with the result being an intelligent and thorough overview of John's theology.

In an excellent introduction, Koester initiates his study of John with a very brief overview of both the origin and context of the composition of the gospel, and the theological questions that arose during subsequent centuries. Well-written and succinct, Koester's text gives the reader a foundation in the composition of the gospel, using current scholarship to address such issues as the environment in which the book was composed and its relation to the other New Testament gospels. Koester also gives the reader an overview of such controversies as Arianism and Gnosticism—crucial knowledge if the gospel is to be approached in an informed and intelligent way. However, he does not get bogged down in dense arguments; Koester gives just enough information to situate John, then affirms that he will be approaching John as a synchronic unity, reading the text as a literary whole. By reviewing these issues up front, Koester is then able to treat the gospel as he wishes—as a cohesive document with its own high theology.

Koester then moves through the theology of John's gospel, focusing on one overarching theme per chapter. He bravely dives right in with a treatment on God, a thread which continues throughout the book. Koester's main thesis is laid out here, that God desires relationship with us. He makes the point, quite eloquently, that God must speak to human beings in a way they can comprehend, namely, through the flesh that Jesus takes on (29). He examines various aspects of God as Creator, as Sender, as Father, and so on, using different passages from the gospel to support his interpretation. He also introduces themes to which he will return, time and again, such as the crucifixion. Though Koester's language can get wordy and repetitive, this chapter makes a valiant effort to describe the indescribable, and sets the theological tone for the rest of the book.

Throughout the next few chapters, Koester examines "the world", Jesus, and the crucifixion and resurrection. He clarifies John's view of the world as both positive and negative, with sin being rooted in unbelief in Jesus and separation from God. Koester also gives a very thorough treatment of the different facets of Jesus, describing John's Christology as a musical chord, with "human, messianic, and divine tones that together give a multidimensional sense of who Jesus is" (83). In looking at Jesus as human teacher, prophet and messiah, and Son of God, Koester illuminates the different but united aspects of the person of Jesus. Finally, he addresses the crucifixion and resurrection, with a particularly beautiful explanation of what atonement really means for John—not taking away guilt, but removing unbelief (115). Thus, the Paschal

mystery not only reveals God's glory, but also illustrates that Jesus is still very much alive, and therefore able to be in continuous relationship with us.

In his last few chapters, Koester treats the subjects of the Spirit, faith, and discipleship and community. Here, Koester begins to illustrate John's message for Christians during and after Jesus' time. The chapters are separate but the theme is consistent: faith for John lies in belief and relationship with Jesus, and is assisted by and through the Spirit, the words of the gospel, and the community that surrounds the believer. Trust and hope in Jesus allow for the reader to remain in relationship with God, and to follow Jesus' call to love one another. Koester makes much of John's foot-washing scene to illustrate this; self-giving love is, for John, the essence of abiding in God and fulfilling the call of discipleship.

Overall, Koester's treatment of John's theology is quite strong in certain areas. For one, his interpretation is appropriately non-linear. He examines the theology of John from several overarching topics, with examples drawn from various passages. Rather than giving straight commentary on each verse, Koester draws theological conclusions from his synthesis of John, and this makes such difficult concepts as "the Spirit" and "faith" easier to comprehend.

Furthermore, Koester makes a concerted effort to stay within the context of John, rather than extending the analysis beyond the gospel's framework. Though it can be tempting to bring in other scripture, historical interpretations, or the modern outlook, Koester is very careful to keep his interpretation within the literary context of the gospel.

Finally, Koester conducts his study of John in a way that is accessible to the lay community, but does not reduce the high theology to a simplistic or watered-down version. For example, he makes use of the Greek words which are important to the gospel, especially when they have multifaceted meanings and implications. Moreover, Koester does not shy away from the problematic parts of the gospel, that is, those passages that have been misused for evil purposes. In addressing such issues as the negative portrayal of "the Jews" (76) and the exclusive sound of "the way, the truth, and the life" (209), he meets these challenges head on and reveals their misinterpretation, rather than ignoring the difficulty. Koester never comes off as making excuses or glossing over the negative connotations; rather, he briefly but thoroughly addresses the passages and terms in a way that is consistent with his interpretation of John's theology. I appreciate his confidence in the intellect and capabilities of his audience; it is conducive to engaging interested seekers today.

Though these aspects of Koester's treatment are definitely laudable, there were some areas in which the text could be improved. His tendency within his explanations to return again and again to the same stories within the gospel left other important passages unmentioned. For example, he refers to Nicodemus repeatedly in several of his chapters, even though the character of Nicodemus, while important, is relatively limited in the actual gospel; meanwhile, the story of the woman wiping Jesus' feet with her hair is virtually ignored. It is not that Koester does not address crucial ideas within John's theology, but rather that he relies too heavily on his favorite stories, while neglecting others that could have been of some use to his argument.

While I appreciate Koester's confidence in his audience to grasp his references and complex arguments, he takes a completely non-scholarly approach in other areas, to the detriment of his case. He makes points with limited or even no citations, as seen in his description of first-century belief regarding the afterlife. He speaks about the contemporary beliefs on last-day resurrection and dualistic views of the body, yet gives no background or reference to these facts (109). Though this work is meant to be approachable, that does not mean he is exempt from academic standards.

Finally, Koester's thematic treatment of John's gospel, while comprehensible and clear, often tends toward repetition and tedium. Though there is a certain irony in the fact that John himself has an obvious propensity towards repeating and reusing the same ideas, it was frustrating to reread the same arguments, examples, and even wording across different chapters. For instance, it seemed like his explanation of sin as unbelief made an appearance every few pages. The content of the gospel is obviously dense and requires clarification; however, Koester's monotony often left me weary and annoyed.

Weaknesses aside, Koester's treatment of the gospel of John is ultimately refined and comprehensive. I believe his book to be approachable by both academics and lay readers interested in deepening their understanding and faith. The gospel of John is notoriously dense and contains some very high notions of Christology and theology, and Koester addresses and explains these clearly. Yet, his greatest contribution lies in his treatment of what these things mean for readers of John. Without modernizing or relativizing the gospel, he manages to draw real conclusions about faith, community, and relationship with God and with each other that readers can appropriate into their own spiritual life. Koester simultaneously stays true to the scripture and brings the gospel of John into our modern era, throwing light on its continued relevance and urgency for the way we live our lives today.

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