

BOOK REVIEWS

***Cultural Sanctification: Engaging the World like the Early Church*, by Stephen O. Presley**

Zachary T. Hedges¹

¹ Trinity College of Florida

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How should Christians in the twenty-first century navigate the uncharted waters of an increasingly secular post-Christendom culture? Perhaps by recognizing that these waters are not so uncharted after all, argues Stephen O. Presley. The church has been here before, and “the present cultural moment reflects a revival of the ancient struggle between paganism and Christianity” (8).

As both a seasoned scholar of early Christianity and senior fellow at the Center for Religion, Culture & Democracy, Presley is uniquely positioned not only to survey the current landscape but to propose the way forward, which is also, he suggests, the way backward—back to the era of the pre-Constantinian church, which was still struggling to define itself and, against overwhelming odds, establish a foothold in a hostile pagan world. The parallels between that setting and our postmodern era (“where Christianity is rejected as morally bankrupt”) could not be clearer (5).

In observing this, Presley adds his voice to the chorus of recent commentators on church-culture relations that he thoroughly documents in his introduction. Charting their proposals for various models of “cultural engagement” between the two poles of isolation and confrontation, Presley offers a still more excellent way. It is one that, like the church of the second and third centuries, “recognizes that Christians are necessarily embedded within their culture and must seek sanctification (both personal and corporate) in a way that draws upon the forms and features of their environment to transform them by pursuing virtue” (12). This historically informed approach of “cultural sanctification” is, to be clear, not a compromising middle way, but a radical alternative that avoids the pitfalls of both isolation and confrontation, committing instead to an active but discerning engagement.

In the chapters that follow, Presley describes five elements of cultural sanctification, of which identity—its “internal” dimension—is the first and most foundational. Consisting of both catechesis (rigorous discipleship) and liturgy (formative patterns of worship and daily living), early Christian

identity formed, in Charles Taylor's terms, a new "social imaginary" encompassing the whole person. This is decidedly not a "method" for influencing culture in the modern sense (25), and one of Presley's important contributions is to redirect our focus away from superficial steps and strategies toward deeper matters of first principles—metaphysical commitments, assumptions, orientations, and the ways of life that flow organically from them.

For early Christians, identity formation was no abstract exercise but had practical, real-world implications, as Presley shows in the chapters treating its external dimensions of political theology and public theology. Political theology deals with citizenship and relations with governing authorities. Martyrdom accounts vividly illustrate how early Christians submitted even to the most oppressive rulers, acknowledging their legitimacy as divinely ordained, though critiquing their failure to uphold peace, justice, and freedom for worship (58–67). In this Christians exhibited a dual orientation as citizens of both earthly and heavenly kingdoms, attending to the responsibilities of each (70).

The following two chapters collectively describe early Christian public theology, or interactions with culture in the public square. This involves the intellectual life, as seen in the apologists' formation of new, "organic" communities (91–92) and in arguments for the uniqueness, antiquity, and civic benefits of Christianity (105). But it also involves the moral life, as seen in the "resocialization" of early Christian "cultural discernment," which sifted complex lifestyle and ethical choices through the lens of its distinctive commitments (115). These chapters display another strength of Presley's work: his pervasive emphasis on the centrality of Christian virtue. Though often neglected in contemporary discussions, ethics, as Presley notes, is more often at the forefront of the postmodern mind than either metaphysics or epistemology.

Presley closes the work with a chapter on the early Christian hope in the "future kingdom of God, and eternal life or beatitude" (143). Unwavering confidence in resurrection life sustained Christians through marginalization and persecution and continues to have apologetic implications for the church today, motivating virtuous living in view of blessings and judgments yet to come (154). This illuminates Presley's most important contribution of all: a hopeful optimism that neither isolates from nor recklessly confronts the present challenges of the church and takes encouragement from the example of the past, from which it humbly gleans wisdom to fuel its march into the future.

The breadth of Presley's interaction with primary source material from (predominantly) the second and third centuries, and his thematic synthesis of their content in each chapter, is impressive, as is his engagement with secondary literature from a wide range of fields. Nevertheless, his style is

accessible and lively, and his use of personal anecdotes and powerful illustrations make this work not only readable but also enjoyable for both scholars and educated laypeople who are wrestling personally with these crucial questions, or who are perhaps leading students and peers to think through them together.

Zachary T. Hedges
Trinity College of Florida



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