

[MJTM 15 (2013–2014)]

BOOK REVIEW

Alan P. Stanley, ed. *Four Views on the Role of Works at the Final Judgment*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013. 240 pp. Pbk. ISBN 0310490340.

In this addition to Zondervan's Counterpoints series, general editor Alan P. Stanley begins with an introduction to provide a brief overview of the four views of the role of works at the final judgment. Chapter 1, by Robert N. Wilkin, has the provocative title, "Christians will be Judged according to Their Works at the *Rewards* Judgment, but *Not* at the *Final Judgment*." Chapter 2, by Thomas R. Schreiner, is entitled, "Justification apart from and by Works: At the Final Judgment Works Will *Confirm* Justification." Chapter 3, by James D.G. Dunn, is entitled, "If Paul Could Believe Both in Justification by Faith and Judgment according to Works, Why Should That Be a Problem for Us?" Finally, chapter 4, by Michael P. Barber, is entitled, "A Catholic Perspective: Our Works Are Meritorious at the Final Judgment because of Our Union with Christ by Grace." Each author is given the opportunity to respond to the other three after his view is presented, at the end of each chapter.

It seems to be agreed that, generally speaking, we and our work will be called to judgment at the *eschaton*. Alan Stanley writes, "It's the end of time, the place is heaven; the scene resembles a courtroom . . . This is the final judgment, commonly known as the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev 20:11–15). It is the last and final act of history before God dwells with his people forever" (9). While there is agreement that this is the final judgment, in the ensuing chapters in the book there is considerable disagreement on the nature of judgment for Christian believers. As Stanley writes, "What about Christians; will they be judged?" (11). Stanley continues, "So here is the basic tension we have uncovered: The Bible teaches that people are justified

by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and yet will be judged according to their works” (16). Just what this means is open to considerable discussion among the contributors to this book.

In chapter 1, Wilkin argues that, “Perseverance is the condition for eternal rewards and not final salvation” (27). Wilkin expands by offering that, “Since only enduring believers will survive [the abomination of desolation, cf. Dan 9:27], no unfaithful believers will be alive at the end of the tribulation” (35). The central plank of Wilkin’s thesis is that there will be not one judgment but two, and that believers and unbelievers will appear at separate judgments. He writes:

The first judgment (of the servants) is the Judgment Seat of Christ while the second judgment (of the enemies) is the Great White Throne Judgment. At the first judgment *believers* are judged according to their *works* to determine their *rewards*. At the second judgment *unbelievers* are judged according to their *works* to determine their degree of eternal *torment* (31; italics original).

From this perspective, I can certainly understand Wilkin’s argument for perseverance. Believers’ degree of perseverance in their works will determine the degree of their reward. While there seems to be support for the notion of perseverance, however, there seems to be little support for the notion of two judgments in Scripture. Thomas Schreiner, for example, offers, “The most natural way to understand the sheep and goat judgment in Matthew 25:31–46 and the great white throne judgment in Revelation 20:11–15 is as the judgment of *all* people” (52; emphasis original). James Dunn also argues, “Revelation mentions only one judgment” (59).

In chapter 2, Schreiner offers his perspective on the distinction between justification and salvation. He writes:

I define justification as being acquitted before the divine judge. Those who are justified are declared to be ‘not guilty’ before God. In addition, justification is understood in this essay to be an eschatological reality. Hence, the verdict of “not guilty,” which believers receive now by faith, is confirmed at the final judgment before the whole world. Salvation, by contrast, means that one has been rescued or delivered; here the focus is on being rescued from God’s wrath or punishment on the last day (79).

Schreiner argues that the works of believers count—that they are necessary for justification but not salvation, which are two distinct, but similar, concepts. He writes, “Instead, [works] constitute the necessary evidence or fruit of justification” (73).

In chapter 3, Dunn introduces some important distinctions between believers’ response to faith today and their hope for acquittal at the judgment. He writes:

In two places Paul speaks about beginning and completing the Christian life. In Philippians 1:6 it is a word of reassurance: “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in/among you will complete it by the day of Jesus Christ.” There is a process certainly already begun but still to be completed (124).

Thus it appears that while faith is an absolute necessity for salvation, the faithful must demonstrate that faith by the subsequent lives they lead.

In chapter 4, Michael Barber maintains that, far from being saved from something, “Salvation is nothing less than union with the triune God in Christ” (165). Barber goes on to make a compelling and challenging assertion. He writes, “Put simply, to argue that Scripture teaches that salvation is the result of ‘faith’ alone and that works *themselves* are not rewarded with salvation flies in the face of Jesus’ teaching” (177). He reminds his readers of Jesus’ statement, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (cf. John 15:5b).

I must admit that I am struggling with the notion of proportionate rewards. To me, eternal life through faith is quite sufficient. I do not believe that our earthly works are to be graded for reward as they might be in this current life, rather our works are our faithful response to grace, nothing more, nothing less. God calls us to creative work and productive work and to share the fruits of that work. As Barber writes, “The good works . . . are *the result of working for God*” (111; emphasis original). While faith is a divine act, faithfulness is a human act and work is the expression of faithfulness. Dorothy Soelle and Shirley Cloyes write, “The more a person develops her creativity, delves into the project of liberation, and transcends her own limitations, the more God is God” (*To Work and to Love: A Theology of Creation* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], 39). In his second letter

to the Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul writes, “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat” (2 Thess 3:10b NRSV). The early church fathers also stressed the need to share the fruits of our labor with needy fellow human beings (cf. Eph 4:28). I find in these writings complete guidance on living a creative and productive life in response to Jesus Christ’s call to us to follow him. I find nothing in such writings that suggests that the degree to which we fulfill this call will result in the degree of our heavenly reward.

This is an important book for anyone who wishes to explore the importance of works from an eschatological perspective. Indeed, when our actions are carried out in faith and equipped by the Holy Spirit they are lifted up to heaven. As Stanley writes, “That is the life that leads to the final verdict, ‘well done good and faithful servant’” (203).

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