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BOOK REVIEW

James Wm. McClendon, Jr. *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon, Jr.* Edited by Ryan Andrew Newson and Andrew C. Wright. 2 vols. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014. 355 pp. and 420 pp. Hbk. US\$69.95 each. ISBN: 9781481300919, 9781481300957.

James Wm. McClendon, Jr.'s work has hidden in obscurity until recently. Now rediscovered largely because of the republishing effort of Baylor University Press, beginning with his *Systematic Theology* (2014), and the editorial work of Ryan Newson and Andrew Wright, McClendon's work has risen in prominence in Baptist academia. He has posthumously been recognized as the most important American theologian of the late twentieth century by numerous theologians within and outside of Baptist circles.

Originally intended as one volume, but now two volumes sold separately, *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon, Jr.* constitute the final presentation of this theologian's work, bringing together unpublished lectures and lesser-known essays. The first volume focuses on his autobiographical works, which is perhaps the best material in the volume. McClendon's life is an inspiration to any theologian seeking to develop both deep theological reflection and also strong personal integrity, living by one's convictions no matter the cost. While being the co-founder of more than one theological movement, he lost two teaching positions, one for opposing racial segregation and the other for protesting the Vietnam War.

The rest of the first volume shows his reflections on Baptist identity, systematic theology, and ethics. It reveals the dynamic development of his thinking over his almost fifty-year-long career. His most important development was when he experienced a "second conversion" in the mid 70s by reading the work of

John Howard Yoder. In much of this volume he focuses on delineating a “baptist” small “b” identity that shows the productive connection between the Baptists and Anabaptists. As he does this, he reformulates different problematic doctrines with remarkable originality: creation, sin, atonement, death and resurrection, the Trinity, the sacraments, the nature and interpretation of Scripture, eschatology, pacifism, forgiveness, ecumenism, catholicity, and Judaism and Old Testament Law. On every one of these topics the reader will find worthwhile insights that demonstrate McClendon was ahead of his time and in many ways still is.

The second volume contains his more philosophically-minded essays. McClendon distinguished himself in the late 60s as one of the first theologians sensitive to postmodernism. His essays on the role of theological language and epistemology predate the current interest in postmodernism in North American theology by several decades and still contain sharp analyses and applications. McClendon navigates the differences between Anglo-American and Continental postmodernism better than many theologians even today. Philosophical theologians will find relevant engagements with philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Austin, Rorty, and Fish.

Also early on, alongside Stanley Hauerwas, McClendon published essays on the role of narrative in ethical character, making him a neglected early developer in the now-predominant post-liberal school of narrative theology. McClendon wrote on theology functioning like grammar over a decade before the landmark work *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1984) by George Lindbeck. While Hauerwas has achieved vast recognition today for his numerous books on ethics, McClendon was never as prolific, only completing the third volume of his *Systematic Theology* (twenty years in the making), just before his death in 2000. Nevertheless his work is perhaps the most productive example of the school. Among his most innovative notions are his “three strand” approach to thinking about ethics, where all ethical problems interrelate to bodily, social, and anastatic (resurrection) dimensions of action; his “baptist vision” of typological reading deploys literary tropes

and practices in a way that moves beyond problematic doctrines of biblical inerrancy; and his “picture eschatology” gives the theologian a literary framework, which makes arguments over premillennialism and amillennialism irrelevant. All his reflections display his ingenuity for integrating ethics with a literary sensitivity to the biblical text in a way that fundamentally changes the discourse on a doctrine.

Almost half of the papers appear in other books in one form or another, particularly his trilogy, *Systematic Theology*, which might appear as a significant drawback for the *Collected Works*. However, many will find his trilogy a daunting read, as complex as it is novel. Much of the overlapping material is stated in the *Collected Works* in a much simpler way. His trilogy lacks his autobiographical reflections (which offer significant insight into the development of his theology), as well as his papers on Anabaptism, Balthasar Hubmaier, Law and Faith (which has immense value for Christian–Jewish dialogue), philosophy of language, and his biographical method. Thus, while the *Systematic Theology* is McClendon’s most comprehensive work, the *Collected Works* will function as the best introduction to his thought.

At \$69.95 each volume, these books will be purchased by few students and pastors other than those writing directly on McClendon. Nevertheless, no research library that seeks to house the great works of Baptist history and theology would be complete without them.

McClendon will become (if he is not already) an important object of theological research in the coming decades alongside the other great innovators of Baptist theology such as Clark Pinnock, Stanley Grenz, and Paul Fiddes, all Baptists of immense originality who helped bring theology into the new millennium. Despite McClendon’s turbulent life that left his writings largely undiscovered, with these new volumes making his work available, McClendon’s work provides important opportunities for the future.

Spencer Boersma
First Baptist Church
Sudbury, Ontario