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#### BOOK REVIEW

C. Ben Mitchell et al., eds. *Convictional Civility: Engaging the Culture in the 21st Century, Essays in Honor of David S. Dockery*. Nashville: B. & H., 2015. 195 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-1-4336-8508-8. \$29.99.

Mitchell et al. present a celebratory book of essays, original research, and congratulatory tributes from colleagues and former students, extolling David Dockery's journey as a witness for Christ and contributor to the common good—an example of what he himself calls “convictional civility.” The authors speak of their relationship with Dockery, how he introduced them to convictional civility, and his vision of “contemporary engagement, where witness is more important than winning and fidelity is more effective than fighting” (vii). Each essay directly addresses how Dockery affected the author's life and how convictional civility affected his or her scholarship.

The book rightly starts with a chapter from James Leo Garrett Jr. on the life of Dockery, in which he paints Dockery as an accomplished editor and author who uses his specialization in biblical hermeneutics to espouse his stance on potentially divisive ecumenical issues that are topical in the twenty-first century. Although Garrett delineates Dockery's many scholarly endeavors, what he does not make clear is Dockery's level of visibility in the ecumenical and scholarly communities, which would speak to his overall influence. In the next essay Timothy George speaks to Dockery's leadership within the Baptist family and in the greater evangelical community in promoting forums for those holding different views and those situated in different denominational camps. His hope has been to promote dialogue and explore theological differences with an attitude of charity and humility. A thesis of this chapter, and even of the book as a whole, is that

these divisions can be assuaged through convictional civility. As with Garrett, George's deep relationship with Dockery may cloud his view on the influence Dockery has actually had on the evangelical community; neither author delineates the extent of his impact.

Millard J. Erickson's essay speaks to the growing polarization of American culture, precipitated by the widening differences George addresses, where one viewpoint is proffered and everyone else is encouraged to share it. Erickson outlines a number of steps one can take to counteract this trend and move toward convictional civility. These steps, while laudable, are simply what one would expect to find from courteous, intelligent Christians. The fact that it has to be stated in writing is quite surprising and perhaps an indictment of the nature of current religious interaction and discourse. R. Albert Mohler follows with an essay in which he speaks to the postmodern concept of absolute truth and its ineffability, arguing that without a definitive truth, culture becomes unmoored and allows for secularization, which fosters liberalism and post-theism. The result of all this is that the culture moves into a state in which humans begin to self-define. Although Mohler states that as a Christian one must counteract this by being a witness for Christ and his truth, he seems to present religion as the cure-all for secularism and its woes. He does not seem to consider that, as Mitchell states in his essay later in the volume, "conviction without civility tends toward anarchy or tyranny" (109). Unchecked religion—religion without the civility of Jesus' direction—would not fare any better than secular culture. The problem here is not with Mohler's thesis itself; rather, the issue is that his argumentation lacks important details concerning the proper manner of providing religious witness, details that are provided by the later essays of Hunter Baker and Autumn Alcott Ridenour (adding to the collective nature of the essays in this book).

In his essay, Robert Smith Jr. uses the witness of the apostle Paul to carry the collective argument further. He defines our existence and our direction in life through the "whole counsel of God" (49), that is, God's overall plan and our role within it, which Smith sees as being about magnifying Jesus Christ. Smith,

like Baker and Ridenour, speaks to the detail lacking in Mohler's chapter by identifying the specific nature of the Christian religion and the messages it must proclaim that become transformative to the human heart. However, Smith speaks of magnifying Jesus and not specifically his message. This may be implied, but there is significance in its not being explicitly stated, primarily due to the fact that Jesus' message, and not just his death on the cross, transforms the heart. This magnification of Jesus within the Trinity suggests our role is concerned solely with Christology, which seems contradictory to worshiping according to the "whole counsel of God."

In their respective chapters, Gene C. Fant Jr. and C. Ben Mitchell demonstrate a belief that a convictional leader should espouse God's truth through his or her vocation while understanding that the mission is greater than the worker. Fant seems to fall short in his exposition of leadership by not relating all the respected leaders he discusses to the leadership of Dockery; again, doing so would give the reader a sense of the scope of Dockery's leadership and his sphere of influence in the Baptist community and in the broader evangelical world.

Baker and Ridenour's essays develop and enhance the collective argument of this book by, as noted above, filling in the lack of detail in Mohler's essay. Baker asserts that virtue and morality are the wellspring of religion and can be propagated only through education. Ridenour buttresses this point by stating that in order to maintain virtue and morality the gospel must be central to the church's teachings and that these virtues must be used in the service of one's neighbor. In this way Baker and Ridenour give specificity to the type of religion that would counteract secularism in the spirit of convictional civility. However, Baker's view of religion and its "positive value of faith for building republican virtue" make religion seem more like an opiate than a conduit to everlasting fellowship with God and the manifestation of the positive human values that flows out of this fellowship. Religion is spoken of as a tool to elicit morality and virtue and to protect freedom, not as a tool to promote the following of Jesus. In the final essay, which is followed by a series of tributes to Dockery, Mitchell talks about how convictional civility has been

momentous in the past and how it can be productive in the future, a hard thesis to contradict.

Essentially, this book addresses, through each chapter, how individuals and societies have moved away from Christ-like behavior when it comes to scholarly relations, straying not just from Christ's teachings but also his actions. This failure of Christian scholars to relate to others in love and humility will jeopardize their message to the world. The remedy is found in Dockery's concept of convictional civility, which is in reality a technical term for Christ-likeness. The authors delineate this concept by giving a picture of Dockery himself, a great Christian, historian, and theologian who embodies the term he coined.

This portrait is certainly instructive, but even though the book is meant to be congratulatory and celebratory in tone, an exploration or acknowledgement of some weakness or fault of the man, giving a more holistic view of his life, would have been welcome. In failing to do this, the book tends to lean toward the hagiographic and away from showing the power and significance of the life and interactions of the common person. Furthermore, the essays and tributes fail to give the readers a clear picture of the extent of Dockery's influence and efficacy beyond his own friends, family, and institution; they paint a picture of a man who seems to court a larger influential radius, but they do not give an indication as to whether he has been successful in this endeavor.

These minor criticisms aside, the book provides some helpful discussion of Christ-centered cultural engagement. The adroit arrangement of the essays allows each one to contribute to an overarching picture of the impact convictional civility has had in the past and its potential for the future—potential that includes a restorative effect on widening denominational and cultural gaps. The embodiment of convictional civility in the life of Dockery exemplifies how one could integrate moral beliefs with a professional calling for the purpose of building God's kingdom.

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