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BOOK REVIEW

Matthew W. Bates. *Gospel Allegiance: What Faith in Jesus Misses for Salvation in Christ*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2019. 272 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-5874-3429-7. \$17.99.

Matthew W. Bates is an Associate Professor of Theology at Quincy University in Quincy, IL. His book, *Gospel Allegiance*, attempts to move today's gospel teaching "from a salvation culture to a gospel-allegiance culture" (82) by proposing "one true gospel" (86). This one true gospel that Bates advocates claims that Jesus is king and that "we are saved by allegiance alone" (see 21, 59, 82).

In the introduction, Bates critiques the traditional understanding of the gospel; his claim is that "justification by faith" is certainly not the "heart of the gospel" (16). Bates instead proposes the kingship gospel as an alternative model, which is described in detail in the following chapters. Chapter 1 sets the tone of the book, as he asserts that the traditional Romans Road approach is not the gospel. The scholar-pastors who Bates says are complicit in this "gospel imprecision" (see 32, 99, 109) include Matt Chandler, Greg Gilbert, John MacArthur, John Piper, R. C. Sproul, the TGC/T4G personalities as a whole, and even Billy Graham. Bates accuses them of promoting and teaching "a distorting framework" (35) which locates justification by faith—as well as the cross and repentance—at the center of the gospel. This idea is attacked virulently by Bates throughout the book. Bates stresses that his own approach is "an authentic gospel culture" (35) that pays attention to "the gospel climax," in other words, "that Jesus is the Christ, the king" (40).

Chapter 2 attempts to replace faith with allegiance. He declares, doubtless to the surprise of many, that "we are saved by allegiance alone" (see 21, 59, 82), not by faith alone. Drawing

heavily from Teresa Morgan's work (*Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), he concludes that πίστις refers to allegiance "when a royal social frame is present" (68). Based on this, he argues that the gospel's purpose is therefore allegiance. Chapter 3 then attempts to synthesize the preceding two chapters into a grand presentation of his gospel of King Jesus. It is in this chapter that Bates enumerates the ten core Christ events which constitute the content of the gospel proper. He states that "the gospel's climax and its best summary" is that "the king is enthroned at the right hand of God as the ruling Christ" (96). Bates emphasizes that this is "the most accurate definition of the gospel" (86).

In chapters 4–6, he attempts to deepen his discussions of other core notions such as grace, faith, and works, before turning to application in chapter 7. In chapter 4, Bates attempts to propose a new understanding of grace along with his notion of "gospel allegiance" (123). To Bates, grace "requires reciprocation," and allegiance is our "return gift" that "validates saving grace" (123). After defining grace as the gospel itself (see 123, 125), he discusses the six dimensions of grace: merit, size, desire to benefit, timing, effectiveness, and return-gifting. Bates then moves on to discuss faith in chapter 5. This chapter, however, can be confusing because Bates uses πίστις and faith interchangeably, which is surprising considering what he claimed in chapter 2. Bates's primary criticism of the traditional gospel perspective is that it severs faith and works. Bates asserts that he has solved this issue by proposing that faith must include works as "embodied acts of *pistis*" (162). To summarize, in his scheme, πίστις is allegiance, i.e., "mental trust" (157), and good works are embodied allegiance, i.e., "bodily allegiance" (see 157, 175), and the two can by no means be separated. He claims that he has recovered this original and genuine understanding of πίστις by his notion of gospel allegiance. He again does not forget to accuse the proponents of the traditional perspective of turning outward faith inward. In chapter 6, Bates seeks to show how essential good works are in our final salvation. Bates begins this chapter by critiquing traditional Protestantism for its "suspicious dislike

of works” (181). His contention is that good works are partly necessary and are required (or demanded) as a basis of our final salvation. In short, Bates’s allegiance is a framework in which good works are systematically integrated into justification by faith alone. Bates therefore says, “each person’s behavioral performance” is “the foundation of the judgment” (184). Bates does not hide that he has been influenced by the New Perspectives on Paul. Finally, in chapter 7, Bates attempts to show how his gospel allegiance framework can be applied in the areas of teaching, pastoral care, and mission. This final chapter is his attempt to prove what he said in chapter 1 that his framework is beneficial for “continued discipleship” (31).

As provocative as Bates’s proposal is, however, it is also important to recognize its shortcomings. First, the preponderance of eisegesis and circular logic is hard to miss. To Bates, *Χριστός* refers to “the kingly title” (92) at all times and *πίστις* automatically means allegiance when it is used in relation to Christ. But his assertion that *Χριστός* is always the kingship title needs to tread carefully for at least two reasons: (i) although the primary meaning of *Χριστός* is related to the kingdom of God, Bates’s use of the title appears to ignore the fact that the Messiah was most of all to be the Suffering Servant; (ii) Bates does not fully explain that, in the Pauline letters, the word group *Ἰησοῦς Χριστός* (or *Χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς*) is increasingly used as a proper name.

Second, *Gospel Allegiance* demonstrates that Bates’s facility in lexical semantics has room to grow. As regards *πίστις*, since his entire program builds on his understanding of the meaning of *πίστις*, Bates should have done a satisfactory study of this word, and made use of tools such as the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae database (which, however, is still wanting). Although he seems to know the shortfalls of lexicon-based word studies, it is somewhat untoward to see him resort to BDAG, which is heavily dependent on the less ideal definition method of lexical semantics (61). Furthermore, when he mentions that “faith” is not even the first definition of the entry *πίστις*, he seems to deliberately overlook the fact that BDAG’s presentation of the definition “faith” is about four times longer than that of “faithfulness” or “fidelity.” That “translators and scholars have long been aware of *pistis*

as faithfulness” (61) is therefore a somewhat audacious assertion. As for Titus 2:10, Bates says, Paul is urging slaves to show “complete faithfulness or loyalty” (61) to their masters. But this rendering of “loyalty” is groundless in this context because Paul says that slaves should not steal but instead exhibit faith (or faithfulness). 2 Thessalonians 1:4 indicates that the Thessalonians showed their steadfast endurance (*ὑπομονῆς ὑμῶν*) and faith (*πίστεως*) amidst all persecutions and tribulations, contrary to what Bates claims. There is thus little reason to render *πίστις* in 2 Thess 1:4 as “loyalty” or “allegiance” (61). Likewise, 2 Thess 1:4–8 can show that faith in Jesus is obeying the gospel. In Col 2:5, Paul says that he is rejoicing to see the Colossians’ discipline and the firmness of their faith in Christ. However—and not surprisingly—Bates states that because “your orderliness” and “the firmness of your *pistis*” have been associated, “*pistis* is a character quality here, like faithfulness” (62). He does not explain what he means by “associated,” nor does he provide enough evidence to render *πίστεως* here as “faithfulness” (62). As for 1 Macc 10:26–27, it is clear that King Demetrius of the Seleucid dynasty is not in a superior position to demand the Jews’ allegiance; both historical and textual contexts show that Demetrius is pleading with the Jews to maintain a trust relationship with his kingdom. Rendering *πίστις* as loyalty or allegiance here is excessive. That is why the NRSV translates v. 27 as “now continue still to keep faith with us.” I am relieved that Bates admits that allegiance is not always the meaning of *πίστις* (see 64, 67). But throughout this book, he pushes his agenda of *πίστις* as allegiance far too vociferously. His logic is clear and yet simplistic; whenever we talk about a messiah, “a royal framework” is invoked and *πίστις* means allegiance (68) without exception.

Another notable error is found in his discussion of the meaning of *χάρις*. Again, instead of carrying out a full-scale word study, he simply draws from Philo’s treatment of Exod 33:19 to argue that “the ancients believed grace could only be earned” (127). By contrast, however, I suggest that Exod 33:19 shows that the source of grace is God alone, regardless of the state of the receiver. In summary, therefore, if Bates’s attempt to recalibrate the meaning of *πίστις* is untenable, i.e., *πίστις* may not

mean allegiance at all, the rest of the book then stands on unstable grounds.

Third, a penetrating fallacy of *Gospel Allegiance* can be explained by what is called Maslow's hammer: an over-reliance on one familiar tool. As the saying goes, "if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." In the case of *Gospel Allegiance*, the so-called royal framework is so pervasive in his entire book that he strains himself to apply even obviously unrelated words within his kingdom framework. Take Luke 12:7–8 for example; it is not surprising that Bates takes ὁμολογέω to mean verbally "swearing allegiance" (99) instead of confessing. Almost every instance of πίστις in the so-called royal framework is interpreted as allegiance (Rom 1:17; 16:25–26; 2 Cor 4:13; John 5:24). His Maslow's-hammer-type eisegesis extends to the point that Bates sees the specter of allegiance even where the lexeme πίστις does not occur at all, e.g., Rom 15:15–16, about which Bates says, "although here Paul has said nothing about faith, once again it is evident that the aim of Paul's gospel proclamation is allegiance" (72).

Fourth, his handling of Greek syntax is questionable in several places. Solely based on the conjunction γάρ, Bates claims that Rom 1:18 should be connected to 1:17. He does it as an attempt to argue that δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ is both "a gospel benefit" and "judging wrath" (76). But the exegetical consensus is that 1:18 abruptly moves ahead with Paul's discussion of human sin (1:18–4:25) (see, for example, Stanley E. Porter, *The Letter to the Romans: A Linguistic and Literary Commentary*. NTM 37. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2015 [63]). Bates tries to use 2 Cor 4:15 as evidence that "grace is already enormous and getting larger" (131). But this may not mean that grace itself is getting larger, but instead that it spreads to more and more people (διὰ τῶν πλειόνων). His interpretation of v. 15 that grace itself is experiencing constant change may therefore need reconsideration. In Mark 1:14–15, although Bates claims that τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ (v. 15) pertains to the "imminent arrival of God's kingdom" (41), there is no guarantee that the preceding sentence constitutes the content of the word τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ in the following sentence. It seems to me that Bates is arguing in that way because he needs

the gospel to directly involve Jesus' kingship, i.e., "the good news of how Jesus became the saving king" (45). In Phil 3:9, Bates renders τὴν διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ as "this *pistis* action by the Christ," and argues that it is modified by ἐκ θεοῦ (167). But it is obvious that what ἐκ θεοῦ modifies is τὴν . . . δικαιοσύνην, not τὴν διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ. His contention that Christ's *pistis* action was God's "righteousness-establishing activity" (167) therefore does not stand. The correct rendering of Phil 3:9 is therefore: "that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness of God based on faith."

Fifth, although Bates acutely blames the Romans Road approaches for grabbing "a verse here and there" (35) and thus distorting the gospel, I am not certain if *Gospel Allegiance* is doing any better, as Bates likewise makes outrageously grand claims based on cherry-picked passages (Mark 1:14–15; 2 Tim 2:8; Rom 1:16–17; etc.). His cherry-picking is found elsewhere, too; although Bates claims that there is no collocation between "justification by faith" and εὐαγγέλιον in the New Testament (36), we do have cases of collocations of justification, faith, and the gospel (Rom 1:16–17; Gal 3:8). Does he ignore these texts deliberately?

Sixth, it is undeniably clear that Bates's kingship gospel is bereft of due attention to the atoning suffering and death of Jesus as Lord and King. Bates presents Christ's suffering and death simply as a pathway (or a steppingstone) for him to become king. Bates clearly states that the cross and the forgiveness of sins are "essential" (48) to the gospel. But it is not difficult to observe his deliberate downplaying of them. For example, in 2 Tim 2:8, wherein Bates says Paul summarizes his gospel, Bates argues that the cross and forgiveness of sins are missing in this précis because they do not occupy the "center of gravity" in the full gospel (48).

Gospel Allegiance is undoubtedly a thought-provoking and yet accessible book. It is certainly laudable that Bates's thesis is crystal clear, and that he presents it in an impressively consistent and organized structure. As I have shown above, however, it is unfortunate that there are numerous deficiencies that offset its positive aspects.

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