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Review of Christopher Watkin, *Thinking through*

Creation: Genesis 1 and 2 as Tools of

Cultural Critique

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Christopher Watkin. *Thinking through Creation: Genesis 1 and 2 as Tools of Cultural Critique*. Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2017. 169 pages. Paperback, \$17.99.

In his book, *Thinking through Creation: Genesis 1 and 2 as Tools of Cultural Critique*, author Christopher Watkin gives a grid in which to explain the current Western culture through biblical principles, as well as offers a mechanism to deal with cultural dichotomies. This work is a beautiful merger of philosophy and biblical theology. Dr. Watkin is an Australian Research Council Future Fellow in the Arts Faculty at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, and the author of *Phenomenology or Deconstruction* (2009) and *Biblical Critical Theory* (2022).

Watkin's grid is founded upon the creation story in the first two chapters of Genesis. His mechanism is "diagonalization" (his term). Watkin's explanation and mechanism help to aid critical Christian thinkers to engage in today's cultural debates sensitively, intellectually, and biblically. As he does so, he also offers a proper reorientation of the trinitarian God, creation, and humanity, even as these terms are deconstructed by today's postmodern assumptions.

In the preface and chapter 1, Watkin argues that it is not enough to tell the culture that the Bible defines reality (2). One must also show the culture that reality only makes sense through the Bible (2). Furthermore, he claims that "if Christians do not articulate how the Bible explains all other stories in terms of its own story and how it provides a positive vision for society, then other stories will step in to explain the Bible in their own terms and provide that vision in its place" (11). In support of this thesis, he offers C. S. Lewis's often-quoted statement: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."¹ Through Genesis 1 and 2 and the doctrine of the Trinity, reality makes proper

¹C. S. Lewis, "They Asked for a Paper," in *Is Theology Poetry?* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1962), 165, quoted in Watkin, 11.

sense, and living in the world is “more sophisticated and more beautiful than extrabiblical alternatives” (xiv).

In chapter 2, Watkin begins addressing contemporary criticisms of Christianity and the Bible’s claims by explaining how a proper understanding of the Trinity resolves a basic Western philosophical conundrum, that of “the one and the many. Is reality fundamentally a unity, or fundamentally many things?” (33). Here, Watkin applies his term “diagonalization.” The doctrine of the Trinity claims that the Creator God is one God in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is both one and many simultaneously. Where Western, Enlightenment philosophy declares reality an “either-or” dichotomy, either one or many, Watkin argues the Bible exposes this as a false dichotomy and offers a diagonalization (27). The Trinity is the diagonalization of the one and the many false dichotomy (34). Applied to reality, diagonalizing the one and the many allows philosophers to see both as equally basic and existing in peaceful relation to one another, rather than competing with and excluding one another (35).

Throughout chapters 3 and 4, Watkin gives several examples of false dichotomies in today’s postmodern Western culture—functionality and beauty, facts and values, nature and culture, intellectual work and manual labor, and nature as sacred or bare fact. With each of the false dichotomies he presents, Watkin skillfully shows that specific statements in the creation account found in Genesis 1 and 2 diagonalize all of them. One example of Watkin’s diagonalizing a false dichotomy with a concept from Genesis 1 and 2 is in the arena of facts and values. The West’s conception is that facts and values are an “either-or” dynamic—either something is objectively true or false, or it has subjective, personal value (70-77). However, Watkin points out that Genesis 1 exposes and diagonalizes that false dichotomy with the construct, “and there was (objective fact), . . . and it was good (subjective value)” (76). Creation

has material texture (fact), and that texture is good (value). After writing about the Creator-creation distinction, Watkin claims the *fact* has *value* because the Creator has declared its value (76). Watkin asserts that “in the world of the Bible, the impersonal can always be traced back to the personal” (71). Therefore, contrary to postmodern Western thought, the cold, hard facts do have value. Through the diagonalization of the “fact-value” false dichotomy found in Genesis 1, today’s postmodern Western culture can seek the value of facts, rather than choose one over the other.

In the conclusion, Watkin restates his thesis and urges the following:

It follows from this that if Christians merely explain the Bible to the culture, then the culture will seek to fit the Bible within the framework of understanding and assumptions that it already possesses. Not only is this impossible, but it also absolutizes our culture in its present state, refusing it the chance to develop and be challenged, while at the same time butchering the Bible beyond all recognition, neutering its strangeness to our generation and shaving off what are currently perceived to be its sharp corners. If we do this, then we lose the gospel and fail to serve the culture (138-39).

Watkin is undoubtedly insightful. Diagonalization is a fresh way to express the truths of the “both-and” instances in the Bible. Furthermore, Watkin skillfully applies diagonalization to the philosophical and cultural battles in the West and does so with Scripture. If he is correct in his articulation and application, he absolutely shows both the sophistication and beauty of God’s created world. Watkin’s section entitled, “The Creation is Unnecessarily Diverse and Abundant,” exemplifies this as he discusses the gratuity of God hardwired into the fabric of His creation (64-66).

However, there are two glaring difficulties with this book. (Granted, Watkin admits in the preface that this book is a reworked and augmented version of a larger tome on which he is working.) First, diagonalization needs to be explained better. To begin, it is a difficult concept on which to latch. At times, diagonalization can seem like a Bible verse veneer draped over the dichotomy that is not helpful in answering the philosophical puzzle—as in the case of nature as

sacred or bare fact. This is not the case, of course, but it can appear this way, especially to a non-Christian. Second, Watkin does not offer the limits of diagonalization—meaning, are there “either-or” dynamics in philosophy and the Bible that cannot be diagonalized? Asked differently, are all dichotomies false and therefore, should be diagonalized? It would be helpful for Watkin to show some of diagonalization’s limits or else one would be tempted with the diagonalization hammer to see all philosophical dichotomies as nails to hit.

Ultimately, though, this book can be helpful personally and professionally. Sometimes the good news of the Bible can become old news. Watkin has an engaging way of presenting old news in fresh ways that rekindles love for the good news. This book can be useful for Christians desiring to renew their love for God and His Word and their love for the defense of His gospel. Furthermore, his diagonalization method can be utilized by pastors in sermons to equip congregants to caringly, critically, and biblically engage the cultural debates that insist on an “either-or” resolution. Additionally, his articulation of “para-creation” can be beneficial in any vocation as a helpful rubric in which to understand hallowing God’s name, furthering His kingdom, and doing His will here on earth as it is in heaven.

Watkin accomplishes his goal. Not only does he offer a doctrinally sound, fresh way for Christians to think critically about what the Bible teaches, he also equips Christians to engage thoughtfully with non-Christians—especially those with Western, postmodern, and deconstructionist philosophical commitments—about what the Bible teaches. In doing so, he does, in fact, offer a correct and more beautiful option to extrabiblical alternatives.