

# Through Barthian Eyes

By Roger Schultz

*History Through the Eyes of Faith: Western Civilization and the Kingdom of God*,  
Ronald Wells (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989) 262 pp. Index. Bibliography

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The book's cover pictures footprints drifting across the desert, no doubt suggesting a spiritual pilgrimage. But after reading the book they remind me of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness—forty years of wandering as a punishment for doubting the Word of God and longing for Egypt.

*History Through the Eyes of Faith* covers western history until the present day. It is designed for students, as a supplement for world history textbooks that do not adequately treat spiritual issues, and is advertised as offering a Christian perspective.

To his credit, Wells takes religious issues seriously. He sees Christianity as both a personal religion and a world view offering a coherent understanding of the cosmos. “Religion is not an aspect of life, but, rather, religion is life”, he notes, adding that any treatment of history ignoring religion is “fundamentally flawed”. The problem is, the Christianity Wells presents is steeped in neo-orthodoxy.

There is, for instance, little on human origins, a serious defect in a text from a Christian perspective. To counteract secular materials, it would be helpful to outline where we came from, a Biblical philosophy of history, and problems with Darwinian hypotheses. You might expect a Calvin College professor to be eager to go on record as believing the Genesis account and the historicity of Adam. But, then again, maybe not.

Wells mentions human origins twice. The first is in a story about a student who asked if the Genesis account was “history” and “for real”. After squirming around to avoid the question, Wells finally offered the girl this definition of history:

The “past” is what happened; “history” is our engagement with the past. So, in order to determine the historicity of anything or anyone, it cannot be history if *we* do not engage it. (p.28)

Someone should ask Wells if a tree makes a sound when falling in a forest where nobody hears it. This subjectivist approach to history is consistent with the book's crypto-Barthian

character.

Human origins are also discussed in a section on Darwin, where Wells notes that “some Christians *have* found a way to reconcile Darwinian biology and Christian belief.” For them, Darwin discovered “the *manner* of human life's creation”, but “the *cause* of the process is one of divine agency.” Adding that these scientists “have discovered (been allowed the discover?) the manner in which God set his creation in motion and allowed it to develop from simple to complex” (p.194), he even hints that God is somehow responsible for this pseudo-Christian approach. Yet Wells, perhaps hoping to avoid Howard Van Till's notoriety, does not formally endorse theistic evolution, preferring to leave it to the readers “to decide for themselves”.

This phony appearance of detachment and letting the readers “decide for themselves” is frustrating. I wish Wells would come clean, tell us what he thinks, and get on with the book, rather than use this cutesy approach of feigned objectivity. Wells is not neutral on key questions (his biases are quite obvious if you read between the lines); he just wants to appear neutral. He begins a section on “A Christian Response”, for instance, arguing that ““It would be easy for Christians to become moralistic at this point and quote Scripture (‘What shall it profit a man...?’), but it is better for us to stick to analysis.” Get the point? No moralism here. No simple prooftexting. Professor Wells insists on analysis; yes, *analysis!* Yet even some of the book's freshmen readers are bound to wonder about the moralisms and presuppositions that inform Wells's “analysis”. And despite claims to avoid “simple moralism” and a judgmentalism that “seeks to praise or blame”, when his pet peeves are at stake Wells insists that “critical assessments” are necessary. (pp. 13, 27, 185)

The book's historical section begins with a treatment of the Hebrews (the good guys) and the Greeks (the bad guys), which has an antinomian slant. The Greeks stressed individualism, which was bad, and the Hebrews stressed “community”, which Wells really likes and which becomes a dominant motif of the book. He asks this simple (and moralistic?) question: “Are Christians in North America ready to abandon democratic and individual liberty in favor of communal authoritarianism?” In so doing, Wells both misrepresents the nature of the Hebrew Republic (which was neither communalistic nor authoritarian) and then hints that the ethical standards of the Bible are not worth following. Arguing that we do not need to follow Hebrew proscriptions fully, Wells says that we must “synthesize”, because we live on “middle ground”, where the kingdom “*has* come, but still it is also *yet to come.*” (pp. 26-27)

This squishy approach to the Bible and ethics carries over into Wells's treatment of Christ. Though convinced that the “historical” Jesus did live, he insists that it is more difficult to prove the existence of the controversial resurrected “Christ”. Wells clearly dislikes “Bible-believing Christians” who say they “*can* trust the Bible” to provide sure evidence on the issue. (And again, neo-orthodox language is employed: “The Bible, while surely trustworthy, is not without its difficulties, and it does no good for the Christian to deny these.” p.31) Wells charges that the Bible was written after the fact, by people with an “Easter faith” and a vested interest in perpetuating the claims of Christ. Listen to how Wells, having dismissed the Bible as a viable and authoritative source, describes the

greatest question of the Christian faith for impressionable college students:

Jesus Christ, "the risen Lord", cannot be documented as "historical", as normally defined. This is not to assert that Jesus Christ was not "for real". It is to say that we join the testimony of the believing community in affirming the central tenet of our faith; but that is exactly the point, it is a belief, founded in a faith, not a conclusion induced from indisputable "facts". (pp. 31-32)

And Wells goes further, claiming that the "Christian faith—centered on the 'risen Christ'—is mythic." For Wells, a myth is a foundational story, which attracts a following, or "community". This community acts "mythically", by gathering to celebrate the story, which helps explain the past and invite the future. (Rudolph Bultmann, call your office!) The question which Wells neglects, is if the story is "true". The Bible is clear that the Christian story is powerful—not because it drew a "community" of "mythic" faith, but because the story was "true" and "really happened". Of course, if Wells cannot get the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ straight, things aren't going to get better. Take his view of the Bible. Wells questions its authoritative character, arguing that it was written late and not entirely by the apostles. (And someone needs to inform Wells that the Apostle Paul *was* an apostle.) The Bible's real authority comes, he continues, from the church's declaration. Since the church declares the canon, it establishes the Bible as a standard. As Wells tells it, the Bible:

cannot be seen as apart from the history of the emergent tradition of the church. In short, the Bible is what the church said it was. This presents a difficulty...to Protestants who asserted the Bible as "the only authoritative guide for faith and life" and would use the same Bible to evaluate the church.

Language like this makes me nervous. In adopting it, Wells has embraced a papist, not a Reformed doctrine of scripture. The Reformers acknowledged that the Bible's authority, while appropriately recognized by the true church, derives solely from God. The Westminster Confession states the question clearly:

The authority of Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God. (I:IV)

The problem the Reformers had with *sola scriptura* is solely in Wells's mind. He does not have to agree with this doctrine, of course, but honesty demands that he fairly represent it.

Wells goes even further, to say that the church is the sole determiner of theology. As he puts it: "In short—like the Bible—Christian doctrine is what the church said it was at a given time and place." (p.43) (Wrong again! Doctrine is what the *Bible* declares.) I wonder how far you can go in asserting the supremacy of the Church over God's revealed Word and still be considered Reformed, or even a Protestant?

In stressing the determinative power of the church, I suspect that Wells, a Calvin College professor, has in mind the current crisis in the Christian Reformed Church, where the ordination of women elders is in vogue. CRC conservatives oppose it as unbiblical. CRC liberals endorse lady officers, arguing that the Spirit of God is speaking through the church to proclaim new doctrines. Hence, because of the demands of our egalitarian age, the church can sanction women elders. Presumably the church could also sanction the ordination of baboons as elders. And Wells would have no reason to object, since doctrine is ultimately determined by the church. On this question of authority (one of the biggest issues of the Reformation)—on whether the Church or the Scripture is the highest standard—Wells has joined the CRC liberals (and the Vatican).

Wells reaches the heart of his historical argument with the Renaissance; he feels three key events broke down traditional religious authority and led to modernism: the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment. His comments on the Renaissance are generally helpful, though he feels compelled to attack the legacy of Francis Schaeffer. Wells also depends heavily on the sociological insights of Crane Britton, whose analysis serves as a paradigm for the book. (In fact, much of this section seems dedicated to the proposition that Britton is smarter than Schaeffer.)

The Reformation is also seen in antiauthoritarian terms. For Wells, the only universal description of Protestants is that they “no longer wished to be Catholics”, and were “conscious rebels against authority”. He argues that:

The first act for a Protestant leader, then, is to encourage followers to *disbelieve* in something that they might believe aright and to *disobey* something or someone so that they might obey aright.(p.85)

That someone who claims to be Reformed would interpret the movement largely in sociological terms as a rebellion is disappointing. (Is it that difficult to remember the Reformation's key doctrines: *sola scriptura* and justification by faith alone?) Seeing the Reformation largely as a rebellion is a papist perspective. And much of the Wells's book panders to the Roman church. He insists on calling the “Counter-Reformation” the “Catholic Reformation” to be fair, but invariably calls the Reformers “Protestants”. (Why not be consistent?) Wells always bends over backwards to be considerate to the Romish church, which in itself is fine, but never misses an opportunity to attack Protestants and point to their perceived failings. He charges Luther with setting up a totalitarian authority, for example, reminiscent of Orwell's *Animal Farm* (p.86).

When Wells finally does treat Reformation doctrines, he does so in a condescending way. On the question of *sola scriptura*, for instance, he denies that the Bible could be an absolute authority by saying:

There is really no *final* authority, because...the Bible (rhetorically, the only authoritative guide for faith and life) is not, strictly speaking, an “authority,” but *becomes* authoritative when interpreted by a person or institution.(p.86)

Find me one person outside the admirers of Karl Barth and the pope who believes that! Wells adds that since Protestants constantly disagree, even if the Bible were the supreme

authority, nobody can know who really has the truth. It is only the people on the “left wing” (the Anabaptists), Wells says, who “when they say 'the Bible alone'...really mean absolutely alone.” (p.88) Sure. Let some Amish fellow tell his elders that, by his reckoning, the Word of God allows him to own a sports car. Few Christian communions are more deeply rooted in extra-biblical traditions than Wells's “left wing” of the Reformation. The feeling I get from the book, is that the apologies for the Anabaptists and the papists was just another way of casting doubt upon the Reformed doctrines of the inerrancy and sufficiency of scripture.

The book improves with the treatment of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, where the stress on the revolt against authority is more persuasive. He argues that “secular-scientific-humanism....*does* present a real challenge to Christian belief, *not* because science itself directly supplants religion, but because a worldview known as rationalism arose from science.” While science is a methodology, or way of discovering truth, *rationalism* is a world view or cosmology. Wells develops this with gusto, even saying mean things about Carl Sagan! “Enlightenment faith is a religion”, he argues, since it gives explanations for the “origins, development, and future of mankind.” (pp.118,123,136f) The following appeal, by Wells, is worthy of a hearty amen:

We who are Christians must not allow the setting of a false agenda that states that religion is outmoded and scientific rationalism is progressive. We insist that rationalism be called for what it is: an alternative religion.

Wells goes on, however, to argue that the spirit of the Enlightenment is expressed in the American Revolution and Capitalism. While admitting that the American Revolution was less radical than the French, he claims that it was deeply rationalistic. While it is true that American leaders were influenced by both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, as Wells holds, he neglects to mention the Biblical worldview of the period, a strange omission for a book allegedly from a Christian perspective. (Wells also hates terms like / ”conservative” and “iberal”—though he uses them, often in strange ways—and prefers the terms “left” and “right”. Are these terms any clearer?) Finally, with sermoniac intonations, he warns American Christians about “baptizing a middle-class Republic...in the rhetoric of the Enlightenment.” (p.152)

Of course, capitalism is also bad, as Wells delights in showing. He dedicates four pages of his brief book to a verbatim interview of a poor worker by a 19th century British commission investigating child labor abuses. The poor “slubber” is supposed to have offered the following “opinion” about the pending legislation: “I believe it would have a very happy effect in regard to correcting their morals; for I believe there is a deal of evil that takes place in one or another consequence of these long hours.” (p.164) That Wells accepts this obviously manufactured piece as the genuine opinion of an illiterate laborer and conclusive evidence of the moral failure of the free market raises serious questions about both his objectivity and naïvetè.

And one suspects Wells as having a selective memory when it comes to horrors. In addition to capitalism, Wells bemoans the terrors of World War I, the Holocaust, and Hiroshima. But we look in vain for mention of the atrocities of communism, by which far

more people perished than in all the above events combined. He does say that Marx writes from “the tradition of moral protest stemming from the Judeo-Christian character of Western thinking”, and quotes a writer who says that “Marx came embarrassingly close to a biblical understanding of cooperative, satisfying, and unalienated work.” (pp.169,171) But Wells doesn't totally let Marx off the hook—he is concerned that Marx wasn't a Christian.

The treatment of capitalism and socialism is an excellent example of Wells' supercilious, academic approach. While not endorsing socialism, he wants North Americans to know that “in Europe socialism does not carry with it the negative connotation it does here.” Wells ultimately rejects both capitalism and socialism as materialistic and, thus, inherently unacceptable.

What then is a biblical solution to problems of economic justice? Nothing. And here Wells reveals his ahistorical and relativistic approach. To be a “kingdom seeker”, he explains, means having to give up “our own as well as someone else's pet schemes and arrangements: capitalism no less than communism, conservatism no less than liberalism, our nationalistic egos no less than theirs.” Does Wells really mean that the free market is no more biblical than totalitarian communism? That America has no greater Christian legacy than, say, Mongolia? That J. Gresham Machen has no more to offer than Karl Marx?

The only thing that Wells can say about a truly biblical system is that it “guarantees community, while respecting individuals.” What vacuous nonsense! And this from a man pledged to avoid simple moralisms. It sounds like a Democratic campaign slogan, or a shibboleth from a sociology class.

The last chapters on the development of modernity have good insights. But every time I think, “Maybe this book isn't so bad after all”, Wells will say something that makes me want to clobber him with a logic textbook. The constant recurrence of optimism in American history, for instance, he argues, challenges the idea of a “Christian America”, since confidence in progress is either an Enlightenment ideal or a sign of Pelagian heresy. (Has Wells never heard of postmillennialism, a popular doctrine of eschatology in the 19th century, which entails the idea of progress?) And one wonders why he complains about heresy. If the church alone determines theology, Wells has no right to grumble if the American church wants to endorse Pelagianism or any other pernicious system.

I cannot recommend this book. It combines a neo-orthodox approach to Christ and the Bible with a thinly veiled attack on conservative Christianity. I certainly would not give the book to students searching for a Christian perspective. But if your child or student has a copy, don't worry. The writing style of this book is so poor, and its arguments so obtuse, that no student will ever finish it.

The children of Israel wandered in the desert for forty years because of their infatuation with Egypt and their repudiation of the Word of God. With the exception of Joshua and Caleb, they perished in the wilderness. They never made it to the promised land. I hope Professor Wells does.