

Defending the Faith, Engaging the Culture: Essays Honoring L. Russ Bush

Edited By: Bruce A. Little, Mark D. Liederbach,
Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Academic, 2011,
266 pages, \$24.99, paper.

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Defending the Faith, Engaging the Culture, is a collection of papers in which theological seminary faculty revisit topics relating to biblical inerrancy that stirred L. Russ Bush III (1944-2008), a Southern Baptist professor and apologist. I believe it is accurate to say the contributors are consistently conservative scholars. L. Russ Bush's book co-authored with Tom Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible*, accompanied his denomination's conservative renaissance and passionate focus on the inerrancy of Scripture. The significant influence of L. Russ Bush extended beyond the Southern Baptist community, especially within the public conversation regarding inerrancy. The editors of *Defending the Faith* utilize published and previously unpublished works of Bush. The book is in four parts; Christianity and the Bible (with essays by Bush, Daniel L. Akin, Tom Nettles, and Paige Patterson), Christian Apologetics (Bush, Norman Geisler, Gary Habermas, David P. Nelson), Christianity and Science (Bush, James K. Drew Jr., Kenneth D. Keathley, Robert B. Stewart) as well as Christianity and Culture (Bush, Mark Coppenger, Richard Land, Udo W. Middelman).

The Journal of Christian Ministry

The editors share Bush's convictions in matters of biblical inerrancy and conservatism. Bruce A. Little is professor of philosophy and director of the L. Russ Bush Center for Faith and Culture at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. Mark D. Liederbach is associate professor of Christian ethics at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. The L. Russ Bush Center for Faith and Culture is dedicated to continuing the work and spirit of L. Russ Bush. Defending the faith and engaging the culture is a phrase that captures the mission of the Center, and this publication is clearly an expression of that institution's mission.

The first section, Christianity and the Bible, broadly affirms a conservative view of biblical inerrancy. In today's Christian conversations regarding revelation and inspiration the word "fundamentalism" is often sensitively avoided. That is proper because the word is in our time taking on meanings no longer compatible with scholarly conversation. That said, the nature of the arguments in *Defending the Faith* relate to such a "solid" conservative position, illustrated by L. Russ Bush's essay comprising the first chapter. "It is the text and not the writer that perpetually provides an infallible word from God. When we say the Bible is the Word of God and thus inerrant in the original manuscripts, we are not pushing infallibility off onto a nonexistent source as liberal Baptists constantly claimed of us in the days of the Southern Baptist Convention's conservative resurgence. Every accurate copy is the equivalent of the original wording. It is the original wording of Scripture that is God-breathed." (5)

The second section of the book, *Christian Apologetics*, is best described as an apologetic for apologetics (the title of Norman Geisler's essay in that section). *Christianity and Science*, the third section, examines science interpreted through conservative Christian faith. The final section, *Christianity and Culture*, challenges Christian living in culture and offers some of the freshest material of the entire book in the process of examining the relationship between nature and culture.

This is not a technical work. It is of interest to scholars and ministry professionals who wish to review conservative tenets of Christianity, especially what may arguably be termed fundamentalism, or who wish to examine the positions forming the core of such a worldview. It also serves as an important marker of the dialogue within the Baptist faith on such matters. Understanding the central thesis of the book requires unfolding the four parts of the book; inerrancy, conservative apologetics and a decidedly Theo-centric world view which interprets science (part three) and culture (part four). The central thesis is that authentic Christian faith calls for a "solid" conservative understanding of God and the world. The editors would further assert their intent to preserve and honor the life legacy of L. Russ Bush.

What follows is my subjective response to the tone of the papers. The arguments surrounding inerrancy that form the first part of the book have been examined, supported, or refuted, with such frequency that there is little room to claim anything as new. On the contrary, they are typical of decidedly conservative Christian apologetics in regard to inspiration and revelation.

The papers offer the view of their authors rather than a scholarly discourse. They are the assertions emerging from deep faith convictions, and may be appreciated as such. L. Russ Bush's essay in the first part is typical, seeking to defend his assertion that it is the scriptures that are inspired, not the men, with the 2000 Baptist Faith and Mission (BF&M) statement. But Bush makes more of the distinction than many would. The 2000 BF&M statement is understood by many to say both scripture and those writing scripture are inspired. That is not to say the distinctions surrounding the idea of scripture versus writer are not there among conservatives as inerrancy is discussed. They are. The essay, however, like the entire first part of the book, is somewhat aggressive toward any who would try to minimize the tension in regard to that distinction.

Daniel Akin's essay then contrasts the 1963 and 2000 BF&M statements on inerrancy. He asserts that the Southern Baptist Convention of June 2000 provided a decidedly fundamental turn. He points to the language "is the record of God's revelation" from 1963 transitioning to "is God's revelation." (10) He references the debate regarding the relationship of Jesus to scripture with this notation; "the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ"(1963) to "All scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation"(2000). (11)

What follows is a defense of that turn grounded in the words of Jesus, focused largely in the statement of Christ that not one jot or tittle of the law shall pass away. The words of B. H. Carroll are cast in such a way to suggest that to hold to any shade of inspiration differing with the most ardent conservatism is contrary to the Gospel. I find

it offensive to have my confidence in inspiration questioned if I feel there are errors in the field of science, or contradictions in historical detail, within scripture. Akins seems dissatisfied with any debate, casting the question as a matter of eternal salvation. (25)

Patterson's work in the first part is a helpful investigation of atonement from a solidly conservative view. Nettles then provides an argument for apologetics, arguing for a solidly conservative view of scripture grounded in the testimony of early church fathers.

Part two of the book affirms faith. The contributors manage to defend Christian belief while avoiding dismissing believers across a broad range of views regarding inspiration. They succeed in simply affirming that Christians can know and form faith reliably. "We have a reasonable faith, and the Bible has commanded that we give reasons for it." (99)

Parts three and four provide the strongest rationale for purchasing and reading this book. Part three provides helpful summary work of scholarly contributions to natural theology, intelligent design, and integration of Christian faith with science. Pastor and theologian alike can appreciate these insights, especially when they are unable to study exhaustively in those areas.

Part four offers wonderful glimpses of Christian philosophy regarding culture. The contribution of beauty to faith, Christian thinking on ethical issues within culture, and the nature of culture are explored. I found this final group of papers to be the most helpful, and a surprising contribution from a book that I found to begin with a rather

aggressive and tough-minded defense of solid conservatism. Middelmann offers this comment, typical of the perspectives of this final part of *Defending the Faith*.

What one believes about life in the real world will create a culture, a sum total of attitudes and practices that a group of people embrace and pass on to the next generation. That belief is a choice, born out of the alternatives of vision, ideas and experiences. A choice always contains an element of separation. A good life is not self-evident. We have a feel for it, but it is a puzzle, filled with tragedy and contradictions. But in the end the Scripture and Christianity alone enable us to separate from the stars and the stones: we are alive. We are not like wilting flowers, which are composted; human beings compose, love, and invent. We are at home intellectually and intelligently only in the world that has an open heaven, where the God of the Bible is our point of reference to give shape, purpose, hope and redemption. (257)

We Christians may differ regarding the nature of revelation and inspiration. But to be led to God, the author of grace, by lovingly constructed glimpses into His nature unites us all in mutual appreciation of His Word. Perhaps that is the strongest argument for the brand of conservatism represented in *Defending the Faith*.